The German address system  
Binary and scalar at once*

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1 Introduction

The purpose of the present paper is to consider the address system of German from the point of view of its components, structure and its use in contemporary Germany. In addition, the apparent rigidity of the system will be dealt with to throw light on the way in which speakers cope with the tension which arises from a binary pronominal system which has to reflect complex social relationships linguistically. In essence, this study shows that while pronominally German has a reciprocal binary system of T and V forms (Du [T] ‘you-SG’ is the pronoun of familiar address and Sie [V] ‘you-3-P-PL’ that of formal address), this simple division does not do justice to the expression of those nuances with which Germans perform their social exchanges. For this reason there are two apparently contradictory adjectives in the subtitle: the term “binary” refers to the existence of two and only two pronouns of address, Du and Sie, while the term “scalar” is a reference to all the linguistic devices which form part of the address system and which allow speakers of German to arrive at nuances not immediately obvious from the binary pronominal distinction.

2 Generalisations concerning address systems

At the centre of the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson is the assumption “that some acts are intrinsically threatening to face and thus require ‘softening’” (1987: 24). For example, they see the domain of honorifics as a microcosm which offers support for their view and show that a particularly sensitive use of honorifics is to be found in the potentially face-threatening scenario of requests. By and large the present-day German address system bears this out (Haase 1994), especially the parafeatures of the system which surround the choice of pronoun (see below).

The encoding of deference in language is based on motivated forms (Brown and Levinson 1987:23), a conclusion the authors reach after examining cross-linguistic investigations of address systems. In their view the means used to realise deference forms are likely to occur can be given in the following order.

(1) a. pluralisation  
b. substitution of third person for second person  
c. other person switches, e.g. first person plural as a deferential form
confirming that the speaker belongs to the social system of the addressee. First person V forms are attested for some countries outside of Europe.

The frequent diachronic development of address honorifics from referent honorifics is widely attested. This view sees the rise of V address forms resulting from group references or third person references being applied to the addressee for reasons of social deference.

In socially stratified societies the higher levels tend to use V-forms more (if a dyadic system exists) and the lower levels the T-forms. However, this is not an absolute universal, Brown and Levinson report on Canadian middle-class families which apparently use more internal *tu* than working-classes families (1987: 24).

The factors which determine the use of T versus V forms vary across languages, both in history and at the 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 this shift on the part of those who address them.

Another orientation of the address system is conceivable. This would be where the speaker decides from the actual speech context in which he/she finds him/herself what form of address to use. In general one can say that such systems tend to be unstable over time because of the considerable flux which they generate. As is well known, the address system of English did not survive and this may very well be because it was not absolute. In the early modern period, as attested, for instance in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, *thou* and *you* could be used for one and the same person, depending on the situation.

It is clear that address systems serve the function of giving linguistic expression to fairly stable aspects of social relationships, such as 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 speaker wishes to take is not congruent with the T/V form he/she uses, a tension arises which cannot be resolved simply in absolute systems but which can receive indirect expression in parafeatures which congregate around the address pronouns.

### 3 The development of the German dyadic system

The use of a plural of respect is commonly assumed to reach back to Latin and anecdotally to Caesar. The truth of this proposed lineage is irrelevant. However, the fact that the plural came to be used for a single individual is evidence of depersonalisation in address and so documents the encoding of social distance in language use. For German, the earliest record of the use of *Ihr* ‘you-PL’ as a form of address goes back to Otfrid von Weißenburg in the 9th century. Throughout the Middle Ages and 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 16th century the third person singular — *er* ‘he’ or *sie* ‘she’ — appears as an indirect address form indicating deference (Besch 1998: 94).

A century later the use of *Sie* with plural verb forms is attested and would appear to be a combination of indirect address and respectful plural as augmented
deference (Besch loc. cit.). There was considerable overlap so that in the 18th century an older Ihr (2nd personal plural), an established Er/Sie (3rd person singular) and an innovative Sie (3rd person plural) were available.2

For the later discussion in this paper it is important to bear in mind that the du/Sie address dyad in modern German came to replace the older du/ihr which was based solely on social position, specifically class (Polenz 1999: 383). In a much quoted speech, Friedrich Gedike proposed in 1794 to the Berliner Akademie that address terms should be restricted to du and Sie and not to further differentiate by class. He favoured the binary distinction as one which accommodated the Sprache des Herzens (du) ‘the language of the heart’ and the Sprache des Verstandes (Sie) ‘the language of the intellect’. Although Germans nowadays would have difficulty in recognising this distinction as that which underlies their address system there is one key feature in both Gedike’s interpretation of the address distinction and contemporary German usage: both are inflexible, determined in principle for each individual and not variable in a given pragmatic context.3

Deliberations on address systems were seen, no doubt correctly, as the province of the middle classes, so that the working classes retained Du as the internal address form acting as a symbol of class solidarity. To this day this is the case and a readiness to use Sie can be easily interpreted among workers as putting on social airs and graces and indicative of social climbers.

4 Views on the origin of address dyads

Brown and Gilman (1960) already noted that there is an iconic relation between asymmetrical social relations and asymmetrical usage. Although Brown and Levinson (1987: 45) maintain that this alone does not explain the direction in which particular pronouns are used, there is an interpretation in which this is in fact sufficient. If one assumes that the V pronoun is one used for respect and that respect in the public sphere is a salient characteristic of social relationships then the use of the V for the socially superior individual is to be expected. The pronoun used for the V form can be accounted for separately. For instance, there is a case to be made for lei (third person singular feminine) in Italian deriving from the word maestà ‘majesty’, which has feminine gender, through anaphoric usage. But cross-linguistically one finds that plural pronouns are predominant for the V form. Again there may well be a universal here that a plural address implies respect and that the singular pronoun implies a personal, i.e. intimate type of address. The plural for respect may itself have derived from the highly personalised and hence informal singular forms, i.e. one can maximise social distance and hence achieve respect by using a form which does not reflect a one-to-one social exchange as does the singular form. If this interpretation of the V form as arising in deliberate contradistinction to the T form then this would further account for the common use of the second person plural, e.g. in French, Russian, etc. Support for this interpretation is of course offered by the fact that T is historically the original form.

Respectful plural One feature of the use of the plural for deference is that it allows the hearer to choose whether he/she is being referred to if more than one individual is being addressed (Brown and Levinson 1987: 198f.). In a way this is like indirectness. It allows the hearer to opt out of the conversation. Just as an indirect request allows
the hearer to decline without loss of face, the use of the respectful plural in groups allows individuals to assume that they are not being referred to. Now while this situation is only a subset of those where V forms are used, diachronically they may have lent support to the choice of plural pronouns for V in a dyadic system.

The source of address systems may well have their roots in referent honorifics. An address system with a V form supports indirectness and thus complies with a universal of human conversation that indirectness is highly valued. Another angle which is relevant in many societies has to do with the individual’s status as a group member. In many cases it is membership of an accepted group which confers status on the individual and so deference is paid to the group via the individual by using a plural pronoun when addressing him/her.

5 The present-day German address system

The system of address in a language is something which is learned consciously by children in their society and so is quite different from the acquisition of one native’s language. It seems to be a valid generalisation 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 Du form to begin with.

Very probably as a result of the fact that the Du is the original unmarked form, there is a general correlation between age and the use of the formal Sie. The Du form is used among peers up to their twenties (unless some professional situation forbids this or the parties in a conversation are strangers). The right to expect strangers to use Sie is assumed to be reached by 15 of 16.

Speakers over 30 will nearly always use Sie to any new acquaintances when first met on a neutral public occasion, i.e. not privately or in some special social setting such as in a club. Unless a suitable occasion arises, they maintain this even if the acquaintance becomes closer. This can lead to situations where two individuals who have known each other for decades, say, next door neighbours, still address each other with Sie (and surnames).

Kinds of social relationship In contemporary western societies social relationships tend to be of one of four types as outlined below. There may be overlap, certainly (4) overlaps with (1-3) but it can occur on its own, the reason for separating it in this classification.

1) Family members and relatives
2) Neighbours
3) Professional colleagues
4) Acquaintances

In the (modern) German context only (1) entails an automatic address form (though in the anglophone world, for instance, (2) and usually (3) entails informal address). There used to be non-reciprocal address between children and parents and this survived longest with parents-in-law, but in contemporary German, they and their relatives are treated on an equal footing with one’s blood relatives and are given T.4
Religious usage is a separate case, deities, saints, etc. are always addressed with T. This has led to certain conventions such as referring to a deceased person during a funeral with T, termed the *Universal-Du* by Glück and Sauer (1997: 127). These situations can be regarded as extra-social and so not affected by the rules of address etiquette.

**Address as a political statement** As a rule of thumb one can say that mutual T is a sign of political liberality, i.e. it signifies abandoning the linguistic trappings of a power relationship. For instance, to non-Swedes it may appear quite natural that the Swedes should favour the general adoption of T as a single form of address given the liberal political system in Sweden (but there has been a recent swingback, see below). The correlation between liberal political opinions and the use of the *du* form probably has to with the egalitarian principle according to which all humans are equal and, if we are all equal, then we should all address each other with the unmarked form of address, the *du* form.

There is another angle to this: if each individual deserves the respect of every other then a language may choose to generalise the *Sie* form for non-personal address so that everyone expresses respect with his/her form of address. This development was to be seen during and after the Russian revolution where the *vy* form (= V-form in German) was generalised (Comrie and Stone 1978: 177) as a sign of respect to workers who had previously experienced non-reciprocal V-T usage from their social superiors.. Official bodies which try to establish address usage by decree are usually not successful. For instance in Russia the provisional government of 1917 prescribed the V form for all militia but this did not lead to any great change as Comrie and Stone note in their discussion of modes of address in 20th century Russian (1978: 172-99).

This usage, specifically among the working classes may vary, however. In Germany, the workers and the party which claims to represent them, the Social Democratic Party of Germany, favour the *du* form as a symbol of solidarity. This is in sharp contrast to the asymmetrical V/T usage which employers formerly often used with their employees.

**Address in the professional sphere** There are one or two fossilised address usages still remaining in German. One is the non-reciprocal address between apprentices and their superiors, another is the third person address which is restricted to certain professional encounters in service industries, e.g. between waiters and their customers as in, *Hat die Dame noch einen Wunsch?* ‘Does the lady have another wish?’ (Braun 1988: 11). The consciousness of this as an anachronism (apart from the catering area) is revealed in its ironical use by Germans today, e.g. in an instance recorded of a younger brother addressing his older sister in the home kitchen.

In certain professions, the *Sie* form is obligatory as it implies a level of social control and seriousness which may not be present with the familiar form. Thus it is almost unknown that colleagues in German banks say *Du* to each other, unless they know each other privately.

German is remarkable, at least compared to English, in having specific professional address forms. Whereas in English these are generally restricted to academic titles or government positions, in German there is a tendency to use the position of an individual in address, e.g. *Herr Pförtner, können Sie bitte die Tür aufmachen?*, the literal translation as ‘Mr. porter, could you open the door?’ shows the inappropriateness of such a form of address in English. The generic and unspecific
professional address in German is *Herr Kollege, Frau Kollegin* which can be used to anyone who shares one’s profession, though there is often a restriction to individuals who are on the same professional level as oneself, e.g. the question *Sind Sie Kollege?* ‘Are you a colleague?’ in the medical profession is a question as to whether one is (also) a doctor, and not a medical representative, for instance.

In this context one should mention the asymmetrical use of first name and surname (more on this below). With nurses this is established with the preceding title *Schwester* as in *Schwester Petra, können Sie mir kurz helfen?* ‘Nurse Petra, could you help me for a moment?’, though in the anglophone world the use of *Sister* is restricted to nurses who also belong to a religious order. In many professions there is no default title and in some of these the bare first name can be used, e.g. by customers to hairdressers, the former always being addressed by *Herr/Frau* plus their surname. In general this usage remains an exception, and the fashion for some foreign firms in Germany to supply their staff with name tags on which only the first name is written is a source of confusion, if not to say, embarrassment to German customers.

**Reasons for using V: Freedom from imposition** Using V-forms maintains social distance and hence freedom from imposition. This is often a reason for not switching to T, i.e. use of V helps to maintain negative face (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62). This is especially clear in cross-gender usage where many speakers regard a too liberal use of T not just as an encroachment on one’s personal sphere but as a covert sexual advance. The sense of imposition is felt to be greatest where the use of T is a clear exception, e.g. when a lecturer uses T with one student in a group where V is the norm. This can evoke an impression of favouritism which is not wished by the addressee.

**Group exclusion** As V is the default in adult German usage, it does not carry implications of unfriendliness (despite the frequent misinterpretation by English speakers), unless a situation has a very high expectancy of T, e.g. in leisure activities. Where there is a possible choice between V and T the use of V can carry negative overtones. One such situation would be where a new individual who joins, or wishes to join, a group is addressed with V. Such address is interpreted as an attempt to exclude the individual in question (Clyne 1984: 126).

**Reasons for using T: Identifying with another individual** There is no doubt that the mutual use of T in German carries implications of identity/solidarity between two speakers. This is often referred to by outsiders in critical commentaries, e.g. *Sie sind Duz-Freunde* ‘They are Duz-friends’, *Sie duzen sich* ‘They say Du to each other’, imputing cloak-and-dagger behaviour to the individuals concerned. Whether or not this is the case, the assumption of personal sympathy is generally valid, certainly for those individuals who use T by choice and not automatically, as with all students.

Group affiliation is an extension of individual identification: the group is a collection of individuals each of which one associates with. However, in this situation the question of personal sympathy is waived. For instance, bus drivers/train conductors use the mutual T irrespective of whether they know each other or feel any personal affinity. The notion of group should be broad enough to encompass common activity. This comprehensive notion of group would explain why, for instance, it is extremely unlikely that one would experience V when going to a disco. In such cases age differences are overridden by common affiliation and/or activity.
The misinterpretation of T The use of T has a double function as a marker of solidarity and of familiarity. These two elements frequently go hand in hand but not always: it is possible to have the former without the latter and it is this which underlies the use of T in the social-democratic (labour) party in Germany and which did underlie the use among communists in the former German Democratic Republic before 1989. On an individual level, the use of T may be misinterpreted in a concrete speech situation if it is intended as an expression of solidarity by the speaker but understood as overt familiarity by the addressee who feels this is not appropriate with the speaker in question. Of course, the use of T, where there is a choice, can be motivated by the desire to be seen as relaxed, uninhibited and not unduly concerned with formality. The dividing line to appearing intrusive is very fine here and accurate judgement of the situation in which one wishes to switch to T is required.

Usage with groups This is a particularly thorny question in modern German as it involves a decision which is potentially a source of embarrassment. The reason is as follows: in any group which one may address there may be some individuals to whom one uses V and some to whom one uses T. The group address is normally not critical if one group is in the clear majority. For instance, if there is one individual in a group of ten to whom one says Sie, then one can address the group with ihr (T plural) with impunity. If the group consists of two to whom one gives V and T respectively, the situation is quite delicate and Germans generally avoid the issue entirely by not addressing the group. It is a question of judgement here: if the individual(s) to whom one gives V is someone with whom one could imagine using T but has not got around to it — an informal situation has not presented itself — then ihr for the group is acceptable. But if there is no question of ever giving V to one half of the group then direct address is avoided.

Non-reciprocal usage In those cases where non-reciprocal usage is to be found linguists assume that there is an iconic relationship between asymmetrical social relations and asymmetrical address usage (Brown and Levinson 1987: 45). The social relationship, embodied in non-reciprocal T/V usage, is one of power and has a small remnant in current German society. This is seen in the relationship of apprentices to their superiors, usually a single individual, such as a master craftsman, a foreman or an individual employer such as a dentist, electrician or whatever. The apprentice is addressed with T in all situations and must give V in return.

Temporary switching This is virtually unknown in present-day German. For it to be acceptable there must be a situation which is so special and so unlikely to be conflated with everyday life that the switch can be tolerated briefly. Historically, it was permitted to give T on specific occasions such as carnival (the period of celebration before the beginning of Lent in Catholic areas of Germany). The use of T was referred to as the Karnevals-Du and is alluded to in Thomas Mann’s Der Zauberberg, for instance. Another case where temporary switching is found is when speakers are under the influence of alcohol. As in all countries inebriated individuals are regarded as imposing and their behaviour, including the unsolicited use of T, is rejected as a whole.

Polenz (1999: 385) refers briefly to what he calls the Situations-Du which he sees as common among tourists, in bars and in sport. Here one must make an important
distinction. The use of Du with individuals one meets in a leisure-time situation which is exclusively temporary is quite common. Thus to find that package tourists have a high rate of Du amongst each other is not surprising. Here the usual caution about using T is waived as the likelihood that one is ever going to encounter these individuals in one’s normal (professional) surrounding at home is extremely unlikely.

Exceptional switching is sometimes found with individuals who have a clandestine relationship, say a professional superior and a subordinate. Here the wish to maintain the private relationship secret may lead such individuals to use V in public, while of course using T in private.

**Permanent switch from T to V** The switch from T to V occurs in only one natural situation: an individual reaches a certain age, usually mid teens, in which he/she finds that adults begin to use the V-form as default address. In those situations where the addressing adult is known, e.g. a neighbour talking to a teenager, the switch usually requires a commentary, something like, *Du bist ja mittlerweile richtig erwachsen; besser ist, ich sage jetzt Sie* ‘You’ve got quite grown up; I think it is better for me to say Sie to you now’. This is not compulsory, however. If the older individual has known the younger from early childhood, for instance with domestic help of long-standing, then the continued use of T may well be accepted as a special situation.

In official German usage this switch has been coded in law, at least as a recommendation of the ministries of education of the various provinces (Länder): the so-called Oberstufen-Sie demands that pupils be addressed with Sie by teachers, at the latest for the final few years of secondary school, i.e. for the period that they are in the Oberstufe (Polenz 1999: 384).

Reverting to V among adults is usually the result of some irreparable rift in the relationship, such as a severe quarrel, a case of deceit or injury. Needless to say, there is no ceremony for reverting to formal address.

**Permanent switch from V to T** There is a general rule in all languages which have a T/V distinction that at the level of greatest personal acquaintance, reciprocal T tends to be used. For instance, this holds, synchronically at least, between siblings, husband and wife, lovers, etc. These instances are linguistically uninteresting as there is no choice involved. However, few social relationships are static and in as many cases as not social distance is reduced on greater acquaintance. For languages with a T/V system the question of a switch to T will surface sooner or later. Retention of V can often occur simply where individuals want to be on the safe side: stick to politeness and you cannot go wrong. The only risk is that if you overdo it people might think you are inhibited or stand-offish. For both parties to be comfortable about a switch attention must be paid to a number of factors.

**Who has the right to offer?** What is essential to an unproblematic switching to the Du form is that both individuals involved are agreed on it. Forcing the Du form on someone is regarded as socially bad behaviour and is usually resisted by the other party. In many situations in which there is a relationship of status: social superior versus inferior, professional superordinate versus subordinate, older versus younger or some combination of all three factors. It is up to the superordinate individual to take the initiative and propose the Du form. This situation is a residue of the original power-based relationship when the more powerful members of society always gave T to the less powerful.
Switching to the *Du* form is never a matter which is abstractly decided but must take the personality of the parties into account. With personalities who do not harmonise this may lead to conflict. There are individuals who welcome being addressed with *Du* as they see this as a sign of naturalness in social exchange while others feel that their privacy is being intruded on and that an unwanted identification with an unsympathetic individual has been established against their will.

**The amount of contact** As *V* is the default for all adults in public encounters in German, any switch to *T* must involve a considerable reduction in social distance. This distance, however, tends to increase if the individuals in question have only infrequent contact with each other. Equally, considerable contact will minimise this distance and so create the essential precondition for the switch to *T*. For instance, if two individuals see each other daily in a private context then the switch to *T* becomes quite compelling.

The reverse of this is where there is a break in contact. For obvious reasons, such as moving to another area to live, contact can suddenly break off or at least be severely reduced. The more time that then elapses, the more the use of *T* seems inappropriate, particularly if it had just been introduced between two individuals when they separated. This is a curious aspect of the address system in German. Although the switch to *T* is instantaneous, it needs a certain amount of time for each member in a relationship to get used to it. This is all the more the case when the relationship was characterised for a long time by the use of *V*. When the individuals encounter each other for the first time after a long break, there is usually some reference to the use of *T* to confirm that it is still acceptable to both parties.

**Getting your timing right** For German speakers, in the development of any personal relationship there is a time span in which the switch to *T* is natural and immediately acceptable. One can leave it too late to switch from *V* to *T*. Native speakers sense when the time has come; a natural situation, i.e. a setting of minimal social distance, such as a private gathering, a party, an outing, may give one the right surroundings for switching to the *Du* form. It can happen, however, that no such situation arises and years go by. In such cases people simply adhere to the formal *Sie*.

Speakers do not like the decision being made for them, e.g. for a third party to insist that two individuals switch to the *T*-form. However, there may be situations in which the pressure cannot be resisted, e.g. in a clearly defined group in which using *T* is the norm, e.g. among unskilled workers.

**Accelerating a switch** Extreme situations, such as those which are life-threatening, lead to an accelerated switch to the *T*-form which is then permanent. Such situations are similar to the position with religious usage: they are extra-social so that the maintenance of *V* seems pointless. To resist the tendency to *T* the normal inhibiting factors, social distance and/or personal incompatibility, must be overwhelming.

**Considerations of personality** Despite the right timing and the appropriate social setting, many Germans decline to offer the *T*-form. This may be due to personality factors: one does not offer *T* to individuals to whom one does not feel at least a modicum of affinity, that is to those one does not want to be identified with at any costs. The refusal to make a move may be the result of great caution, after all if one remains with *V* one has not committed any social faux pas and can at worst be judged
to be distant in manner. For many Germans the irreversibility of the switch acts as a brake.

**The ritual change from V to T** Some languages have a conventionalised ritual for the switch: *Bruderschaft trinken* ‘drink brotherhood’ in German and — as a borrowing — in Polish. However, the ritual, if it is practised, has an aura of quaintness in present-day German and is commonly restricted to offering T to females and is as often as not the expression of distinct sexual interest.

**Turning down an offer** To decline the offer of T is normally considered insulting in German. If one party nonetheless feels that the retention of V is appropriate, then the refusal of the switch needs to be explained. Such explanations usually refer to social inappropriateness, e.g. when there is a great age difference, especially if the individuals in question are of the opposite sex. But the real motivation may not always be given. Frequently, the individual who is offered T does not want to be identified too closely with the individual from whom the offer comes and hence declines. Another motivation which the present author has repeatedly observed is the fear that abandoning V could lead to a loss of respect, particularly if the relationship is asymmetrical in terms of social and/or professional status. A frequent reason mentioned by superiors is the inability to express criticism and have this accepted if a reciprocal switch to T is made, i.e. the option of reprimanding someone weighs heavily in deciding about a switch to T. This perceived inability is certainly a consequence of the very strong identification function of the T form in German, although the loss of authority which speakers fear is often more imagined than real.

**Cross-gender forms of address** One of the more unfortunate aspects of the familiar form of address is that it may be interpreted as a covert sexual advance where it is not intended as such. For this reason one finds that there is a greater incidence of the *Du* form among co-sexuals. Misinterpretation of the *Du* form is however only possible in those situations in which there is an equal probability of the *Sie* form being used. And in some cases the use of *Du* is indeed intended as just such an advance.

**Unsolicited T** The problem with using T in German without the consent of the addressee is that it entails a lack of respect or a severe imposition. *Ich hoffe, ich bin Ihnen nicht zunahegetreten* ‘I hope I did not impose on you’ is a common apology in German, but unsolicited T would suggest that one did just that. It also implies close identification and the addressee has a right to insist that this is only permissible with mutual consent, otherwise one’s behaviour is criticised as *distanzlos* ‘far too familiar’. Where there is a clear cline in social status unsolicited T implies a lack of respect. This may frequently be the case, whether intended or not, and is the main reason why immigrant workers resent the use of T without being asked if this is acceptable to them.

**Using T as an insult** The factor of respect is central in relationships characterised by asymmetry of status. For this reason unsolicited T is regarded as insulting. In situations of rage, a sudden switch is, however, particularly common, though paradoxically in controlled altercations, especially when legal measures are in the offing, V is the preferred mode of address, should there be a choice.
6 The pragmatic manipulation of formality

There is an inherent tension in absolute binary systems of address. Social relationships are scalar with a whole range of values on a cline from informal to formal. With a dyadic system the reflection of these relationships in language becomes difficult and speakers naturally search for means to express the nuances they experience in their social contacts.

The desire to background formality The German address system, like those of other modern European languages, is not based on a pragmatic evaluation of the situation obtaining at the time of an exchange. It has a more absolute character as can be seen from the following generalisations for contemporary urban German.5

1) The form of address is fixed at any one point in time. To use the incorrect form, specifically to use the T-form to someone with whom this has not been agreed on, is a source of extreme social embarrassment. The only exception to this might be situations of great emotional excitement in which a blind eye might be turned for a short while.

2) The form of address is particular to each individual, except clearly defined social groupings, such as students. Furthermore, there are few social activities which automatically entail the use of the T-form. However, certain kinds of sports, such as football, do fall into this category.

3) The only change which is socially acceptable is that from V to T. There are social conventions on how this switch is initiated (priority given to age and social or professional status).

All address systems which are independent of the discourse situation in which the speaker finds him/herself suffer from the drawback that one cannot switch to the T-form to temporarily reduce social distance. This is a step which German speakers consider carefully as it can only be reversed with considerable consequences for the relationship of the individuals in question.

The following sections deal with what I choose to call “the pragmatic manipulation of formality”. By this is meant the reduction or increase of formality by various means apart from the use of T/V pronouns. The features involved are termed “parafeatures” as they are clearly associated with the T/V pronouns but critically do not show the absolute binary division which holds for the pronouns. Note that the following sections will not deal with paralinguistic elements such as gestures, body language or the linguistic level of prosody which by means of intonation can help considerably to render the binary address system scalar. One should perhaps mention here a prominent non-linguistic correlate of the use of V: speakers who use the formal address have a much greater tendency to shake hands on meeting and parting than those who use T.

In the following those elements of discourse are discussed which can have a value on a scale of formality. All elements can go both ways, i.e. increase or reduce the degree of formality in an exchange.
6.1 Combinations of pronoun and name

**Sie and first name** The use of this combination has generally been restricted to those situations where there is a fair degree of acquaintance between the interlocutors and — significantly — a difference in age of approximately a generation. A typical situation is where the parents of a child are addressing one of the latter’s friends. This combination may have arisen from a transition from first name + T-form, always used for children, to an adult system where the V-form is obligatory but in this specific situation the first name was retained due to the degree of acquaintance. This highlights a generalisation of the German address system: there is no situation in which a switch from surname to first name is made only, this is subsumed under the V to T shift. In fact Germans who wish to initiate a shift from V to T frequently invite the addressee to use the first name of the speaker, e.g. *Du kannst mich doch Hans nennen.* ‘You can call me Hans’. This implies a switch to T, though it could be a source of potential ambiguity, i.e. an invitation to switch to *Sie* + first name, as the present author once experienced with an older female acquaintance who meant the offer literally, that is as an offer to use first names but not change to T.

Although the practitioners of this type of address may not wish to admit it, the combination of *Sie* and first name is a continuation of a non-reciprocal V/T situation. It is the subordinate who is addressed by his/her first name while the superordinate is usually addressed by his/her surname, though not in this situation with an academic title as well, should he/she have one. The justification for the alignment as subordinate / superordinate may derive from age (a generation gap, again between parents and the friends of their children) and/or profession, say with teachers and, more recently, with university lecturers and their pupils or students. In the latter case there is more room for manipulation, for instance the first name is not necessarily used when chiding a student, e.g. for not having done his/her work. Here, as in other situations, the *Sie* and first name combination may imply, or at least be interpreted as having, a sexual overtone when practised by a male teacher/lecturer vis à vis a female pupil/student. Mutual *Sie* and first name would seem to be rather the exception, again because the combination is a milder form of the old non-reciprocal usage and if speakers are prepared to use first names, then they usually go the whole way and switch to T.

**Du and surname** This is a restricted combination which occurs in specific professional situations, e.g. in department stores between colleagues, on the shop floor so to speak (Clyne 1984: 126). It is not an option in the pragmatic manipulation of formality today. It was common in the military and in certain schools though in both these cases this is not accepted practice today. Occasionally, some specific social subgroups, such as male teenagers, may engage in this practice still.

**Phonetic reduction** In a purely V environment any use of T is phonetically very salient. The long /u:/ of *Du* does not occur in any situation where V is the norm. For this reason even the generic use of *Du* can make others feel uncomfortable. One solution to this is to reduce the vowel of *Du* to schwa. This increases the acceptability of a T form, generic or not, used in a V context. There is a certain tradition to this practice (see third example below which is a fixed expression) and the syncope with the verb form which attends it is generally given orthographic recognition as in the following examples where the suffixed -*te* (conflated with the verb ending) indicates
the incorporated Du /du:/ whose onset is devoiced by assimilation and where the vowel is schwa.

*Siehste! Das hat man davon.*
‘There you are! That’s what happens.’

*Weisste, die ganze Geschichte ist dumm gelaufen.*
‘Well, you know, the whole thing went wrong.’

*Haste was, biste was.*
Lit. ‘If you possess something then you count as somebody.’

**Reference honorifics** Although German is not rich in reference honorifics there are one or two means of reference which are relevant to the degree of formality in a discourse. The highest degree of formality is shown by using surname along with a possible academic title. In the mid range is the surname with a preceding *Herr* or *Frau* depending on sex. Distinctly informal, and frequently contemptuous, is the use of the definite article and surname (not translatable into English) as in the following scale.

Decrease in formality ——> *(Herr/Frau) Dr. Müller*  
*Herr/Frau Müller*  
*Der/die Müller*

**Combinations of pronouns** Any guide to pronoun usage in German will state that V is always *Sie* and that it requires the third person plural for manifestations of the verb. In colloquial German the picture is not so simple. There are limited means of decreasing formality on the fly so to speak. The variable means of expression involve group address (see above) where the second person plural is used for more than one person each of which may be addressed by *Sie*.

1) Pronominal
   *Singular Sie, plural ihr*
   *So, und was haltet ihr von unserem neuen CIP-Pool?*  
   ‘So what do you think of our new computer pool?’ instead of:
   *So, und was halten Sie von unserem neuen CIP-Pool?*

2) Verbal
   *Imperative 2nd person plural in a V context*
   *Jetzt kommt ihr, wir müssen los.*  
   ‘So come along now, we must go’ instead of:
   *Jetzt kommen Sie, wir müssen los.*

**Group address again** One way of indicating informality without taking the irretrievable step of switching to T presents itself with groups. As noted above, there is no clear guideline here: if the group is mixed with regard to terms of address then *ihr* (T-plural) is possible but only advisable if the T individuals predominate in a group. However, one can send a signal of informality to a mixed group by deliberately using T. This is also a quantitative issue: repeatedly addressing a mixed group with T increase the signal value of this usage and is generally only found in private gatherings, e.g. when sitting together for a meal after work whereas in a board meeting at a firm or a faculty meeting at a university, the *ihr* address is inappropriate even if there are colleagues one addresses individually by *Du.*
The generic Du

The *Sie* form is specific to single individuals. If one is making a general reference, although in the company of persons to whom one gives *V*, it is still possible to use a form I label “generic *Du*”. By this is meant a pronoun which does not have a single individual reference. Take for instance the sentence *Du kannst nicht durchfahren, die haben die Strasse gesperrt* ‘You cannot drive through here. They’ve closed off the road’. Another example would be where the use of *T* stems from a type of inner monologue as when recounting a story, e.g. *Dann habe ich mir gedacht, sowas kannst Du gar nicht machen* ‘Then I thought. You just can’t do something like that’. In this case the person referenced by the *T* form is the speaker him/herself.

In a speech context in which all parties are using *T* such usage goes unnoticed. However, in either a mixed address context or an exclusively *V* situation one must be careful to ensure that that the generic *Du* is not misinterpreted as the *Du* of address. Hence one should not have direct eye contact, not face the addressee directly and not be in close proximity. This usage in no way affects the *V* status of the addressee, but the common employment of generic *Du* can be used unconsciously by speakers to create a less formal atmosphere.

7 Parafeatures of the address system

The discussion in the previous section concerned the variable use of address pronouns and verb forms, which are determined by person and number just like the pronouns. However, there are some parafeatures of the address system in German which can be manipulated to render the linguistic expression of formality scalar.

7.1 Salutations and parting

The beginning and end of an exchange are points where one can manipulate formality. The beginning is marked by an opener which can be a personal name, preceded by an honorific or academic title, a verb of greeting or a plain pronoun all of which have different values on a scale of formality. In addition there are openers for reading style, as when holding a lecture, or when one is writing a letter of course.

Opener

The use of personal names in formal contexts involves either the honorific *Herr* or *Frau* plus an academic title if the addressee possesses one. In general it is fair to say that Germans are fairly conscious of titles, so dropping one requires the tacit consent of the addressee, especially in professional contexts. For instance, students if they are fairly well acquainted with a lecturer may leave out the title in address, but usually need (non-verbal) reassurance that this is acceptable, at least on the first occasion. In certain cases, as in the medical profession, the title is never dropped (by patients). Medical doctors tend to address each other as *Herr Kollege/Frau Kollegin*.

The standard verb of greeting is *grüssen*. The formula *Grüss’ Dich* ‘(I) greet you-SG-T’ is well established and is expanded in certain cases to *grüsß’ Sie* ‘(I) greet you-SG/PL-V’ or *grüsß’ Euch* ‘(I) greet you-PL-T’, depending on address context. Apart from greetings which involve a pronominal object there is a whole range of others from a neutral *Guten Tag* “good day” through a more informal *Hallo!* (with stress on the second syllable) to distinctly informal (and often intentionally youthful)
Hi! Regionally, German shows many variations among openers, e.g. *Gruß Gott* is common in Bavaria in the south of the country.

The plain pronoun is often a common opener (Glück and Sauer 1997:123), especially for questions or for drawing the attention of others. Here one can note differences, *Du, darf ich mir einen Kaffee nehmen?* ‘Say, can I help myself to coffee?’ is quite friendly, but *Sie da, was machen Sie mit dem Auto?* ‘You there, what are you doing to the car?’ is chiding, if not to say aggressive, as is *Hallo!* with initial stress (see below).

**Written usage** Written style address can be used in speeches and obviously in writing and has the basic neutral formula *Meine Damen und Herren* ‘ladies and gentlemen’ which has a slightly informal variant beginning with *Liebe(r)* ‘dear’ and followed by a noun appropriate to the group addressed, e.g. *Liebe Hörerinnen und Hörer* ‘dear listeners-FEM and listeners-MASC’ on the radio or *Liebe Parteifreunde* ‘dear party friends’ (but not: *Liebe Parteifreundinnen, liebe Parteifreunde* because *Freundin* means ‘girlfriend’) at a political rally.

In very formal address there is a range of options restricted to certainly addressees. *Spectabilis* refers to faculty deans, *Magnifizenz*, amongst others, to university vice-chancellors, *Exzellenz*, again amongst others, to ambassadors. But in everyday usage, the two most useful formulae in the manipulation of formality are *Sehr geehrte(r)* and *Liebe(r)* as in *Sehr geehrter Herr Meyer* versus *Lieber Herr Meyer*, both ‘dear Mr. Meyer’. The first is definitely more distant and at the very least implies caution on the part of the writer. In terms of currency, both formulae are equally possible and Germans often spend much thought on deciding which to use with a certain individual. By contrast the closing formulae in letters do not appear to carry the same weight although there is also variation here. The standard formula is *Mit freundlichen Grüßen* ‘Yours sincerely’ and can be used for anyone in any situation. A more personal variant is *Mit herzlichen Grüßen* or *Herzlichst* while the use of *Dein(e)* plus first name, when the receiver of the letter is addressed with T, is not. Older forms such as *Ihr Ergebener* ‘Yours devotedly’ or *Hochachtungsvoll* ‘With great respect’ are regarded as stiff and stilted nowadays.

**Anonymous address** With strangers one is often in the situation where one does not know what the name of the individual is (or chooses not to use it). There is a slightly antiquated address for women, *gnädige Frau*, lit. ‘kind lady’ and a simpler form for men *mein Herr*, lit. ‘my sir’. There are difficulties with these forms, however. The first is old-fashioned and can be interpreted as cheeky and the later can be slightly aggressive in tone. Speakers thus often fall back on the forms *junger Mann, junge Frau* ‘young man, young woman’ which are quite neutral where appropriate. But these forms tend to be extended upwards on the age scale and the present author has frequently been addressed as *junger Mann* despite being in his mid-forties, *So junger Mann, Sie suchen CD-Rohlinge* ‘So young man, you are looking for blank CDs’.

The general salutation *Hallo* is present in German but not as neutral as the term *hello* in English from which it derives. *Hallo* in German (with initial stress) is not so much a general greeting as a call for attention, particularly among strangers and very often with a reproachful undertone, e.g. *Hallo, haben Sie schon bezahlt?* ‘Hey, have you paid yet?’.
Third person deixis Both *Herr* and *junger Mann* are available as neutral terms as is *junge Frau* for young females, e.g. *Der Herr möchte bezahlen* 'The gentleman would like to pay', *Der junge Mann hat eine Frage* 'The young man has a question', *Die junge Frau wartet schon lange* 'The young woman has been waiting for a long while'. For women there is a distinction between *Frau* and *Dame*, the latter being more respectful irrespective of formality, e.g. *Die Dame an der Kasse hat leider das Kleingeld vergessen* 'Unfortunately the lady at the cash desk forgot the change'.

Ironical usage For the sake of completeness one can mention that some Germans take an ironical stance vis à vis their own address system. This consists of jocular reference harking back to now obsolete forms which would be part of the passive competence of most Germans, e.g. *Werte Ehefrau*, literally ‘valued wife’, *Hocher Schwiegervater*, literally ‘gracious father-in-law’. The value of such forms is not perhaps quite as peripheral as one might think, a quick reduction in formality can be achieved by using a deliberately archaic address which in a gentle manner reminds the addressee of his overly formal character, e.g. *Geschätzter Kollege, könnte Er vielleicht den Brief doch noch unterschreiben?*, literally ‘Admired colleague, could he perhaps sign the letter after all?’. Equally ironical are self-effacing references to the speaker him/herself, e.g. *Meine Wenigkeit*, literally ‘my smallness’, *Euer ergebenener Diener* ‘your devout servant’ can be used to ridicule a stiff addressee as in *Meine Wenigkeit hat sich erdreistet, eine Frage zu stellen*, approximately ‘My worthless self has had the temerity to ask a question’.

Saying goodbye: Tschüss versus Aufwiedersehen In everyday spoken usage, the area where a great deal of formality variation is to be found is with the two main parting formulae of German, *Tschüss* versus *Aufwiedersehen*. Historically, *Tschüss* derives from French *Adieux* and *Aufwiedersehen* simply means ‘until we see each other again’ (*Aufwiederhören* is the corresponding form used in telephone conversations and means ‘until we hear each other again’). Of the two formulae, *Tschüss* is definitely the more informal and has distinct overtones of friendliness. *Aufwiedersehen* is neutral in public situations of V address. However, because *Tschüss* is compatible with V usage — but T address and *Aufwiedersehen* are not — speakers have a choice of which formula they use. Thus the deliberate use of the one rather than the other can imply relative friendliness or relative distance, i.e. deliberately saying *Tschüss* to someone you address with the *Sie* form implies a slight slackening of the formality of V usage. However, here as with the choice between *Du* and *Sie* in the first place, only the high-status individual, the person in a position of ‘power’, is allowed to say *Tschüss* first. If he/she says this the other, low-status individual can reply in the same way. If the latter first utters *Aufwiedersehen* as parting formula and the high-status individual then says *Tschüss*, the low-status one is liable to reply by a second parting formula, this time *Tschüss*. This pattern is not, however, confined to situations with differences in status, it can occur simply where one individual wishes to signal friendliness vis à vis another.

Furthermore, there are slight differences in the use of *Tschüss* which depend on pronunciation. The full phonetic form is [tʃʊːs] but there is also a more colloquial form [tʃɔː] (especially in the west/north-west of Germany) which implies an even greater degree of familiarity, however, this is often judged to be a bit too offhand. The opposite to this situation is where one party deliberately says *Aufwiedersehen / Aufwiederhören* to express disapproval of his/her interlocutor. Again this is
interpreted negatively only if the possibility of saying Tschüss is there to begin with. One should also mention here that foreign parting formulae are to be found colloquially in Germany. Ade, in the south-west of Germany, has a considerable vintage but no general currency in the rest of the country. Ciao (from Italian) and Bye(-bye) (from English) are used frequently by younger members of the population.

The clear existence of a choice between the two parting formulae Tschüss and Aufwiedersehen in present-day German has become obvious in a recent change in public announcements with the railways. The standard commentary on the tannoy of German intercity trains just before reaching their destination has been changed of late and now runs something like the following: Wir wünschen Ihnen eine angenehme Weiterreise und würden uns freuen, Sie bald wieder als einer unserer Gäste begrüßen zu dürfen. Tschüss und Aufwiedersehen. ‘We wish you a comfortable onward journey and would be pleased to be allowed to greet you soon as one of our guests again. So long and goodbye’. What is remarkable here is the use of both partings in an attempt to appear laid-back and friendly and still not offend putatively serious-minded passengers who regret what they see as the general Americanisation of German society in the too liberal use of informal terms. Nonetheless, the entire formula tends to backfire, not least because of the very stilted expression begrüssen zu dürfen ‘be allowed to greet’ which is quite incompatible with Tschüss which follows it.

8 Conclusion: Possible change in the German address system

Although there may have been changes in certain professional groups, such as among sub-professorial staff in universities, as noted by Clyne (1984: 126f.), there is no question of a switch of the unmarked value among unacquainted adults from Sie to Du (as opposed to the situation in Swedish, for example, see above). This has really only happened for students, a clearly defined sub-group of society, although a certain degree of flux has been noted for Germany. Specifically, in the years following the student unrest of 1968 an increase in the use of Du was noted. During the general conservatism of the 1980’s a reversal could be seen and Sie became established again, e.g. as virtually the only form of address between teachers and pupils, university lecturers and students. Such a pendulum movement is only to be expected because the address system of a language reflects — admittedly to a limited degree — the general climate of the society which uses it. This is true elsewhere as well. In Sweden a revival of the former second person plural pronoun ni can be observed, especially as a fashionable usage among young people. There is considerable confusion at the moment and it is uncertain whether the old dyadic system will re-establish itself but this phenomenon does go to show that address systems can show a certain pendulum movement, certainly across generations.

In order to establish for certainty whether there is genuine movement in the German address system, and what its nature is, linguists must concern themselves with the phenomenon. A glance at works treating tendencies in present-day German such as Stickel (ed., 1990), Heringer et al. (eds, 1994) or Rösler and Sommerfeldt (eds, 1997) reveals that none of the contributions in these volumes deals with the address system. Other issues are frequently discussed, typically the number of Anglicisms in present-day German, and perhaps the weight of these largely lexical changes, overshadows any shift in the pragmatics of the address system.
Notes

* I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for many helpful comments in which he/she pointed out some further aspects of this subject and added some bibliographical items of value.

1 For other languages, see the representative collection in Winter (ed., 1984).

2 Surprisingly, German scholars writing on the history of their language do not always seem concerned with the development of the system of address (though the matter is usually treated in handbooks on stages of German, such as Middle High German). Polenz, for instance, in his comprehensive four volume history of German does not deal with the historical issue at all but has a brief section on it in the volume on contemporary German (Polenz 1999: 383-5). On the other hand Clyne in his monograph on German language and society (Clyne 1984: 124-30) does deal with this area and indeed with the grey-areas in the German address system. This may be due to the higher awareness an anglophone would have of the address system, seeing as how it does not exist in English.

3 There may well be differences here between national varieties of German. These have been around for quite some time, e.g. the Austrian Offiziers-Du which came to be seen in contrast with the Prussian Sie at the end of the 19th century (Besch 1998: 101-3).

4 As an aside one can mention that animals are always addressed with T as the whole system does not apply to them.

5 The reference to ‘urban’ here is deliberate as usage in rural communities is quite different. The occurrence of T-forms is general greater in the country, probably because of the higher degree of acquaintance and social bonding which obtains there, the authority structure of rural communities notwithstanding. One could also mention in this context that Irish, which in its historical development is entirely a rural language, does not have a T/V system.

6 The remarks here are based on supraregional German which derives from northern usage. Southern German has slightly different forms: Aufwiederschauen often has much of the range of Tschüss as southern German does not use this but either Servus (Bavaria) or Ade (Swabia and south-west in general). Both of these latter forms are associated with high degrees of informality and tend to be associated exclusively with the T-form.

7 In this context, one could mention the behaviour of the mass media. Certainly with private television stations it is common for guests on any of the innumerable talk-shows to be addressed by T. This is a type of compulsive duzen where the individuals have no choice but to comply and from their non-verbal reactions it is frequently obvious that they are uncomfortable with this. However, given the position of power of the interviewer or host, the guests have no option but to conform.

8 Barbour and Stevenson (1990), despite its title, is largely concerned with dialectal variation in German.
It should be said, however, that there is a body of specialist literature on this subject. In many cases this has been (tellingly) by non-German authors such as Findreng (1976) and Yamashita (1990). Mention should also be made of the prize which was offered in 1989 by the German Academy for Language and Poetry concerning terms of address, see the collection of answers in Kretzenbacher and Segebrecht (1991).

References


