

Musings on formal and informal address

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My entry about *Good-Bye, Lenin!* appears to have turned into a discussion of formal and informal terms of address in various languages and cultures. Sweden effectively abolished the “du”/”ni” distinction in the 1970’s during the so-called “du-reform”, getting rid of the formal “ni” and having everybody address each other as “du” – even the king and prime minister. (I’m told this is the same movement that also got people to greet each other with a simple “Hej!”) There’s a nice discussion of the du-reform from Language Hat. I found it particularly interesting that

Swedes traditionally addressed anyone with a title by that title, using the third person: “Would the professor like more tea?” Thus the use of “Ni” was slightly derogatory, implying that one’s interlocutor had no title or office worth bothering about.

Of course, I didn’t discover this until I had already addressed some people as “ni” and probably either amused or insulted them. (Possibly both.) In English, the use of third person address as a substitute for “you” is long gone, unless you intend to be obsequious to the point of being insulting: “Would the gentleman please take a seat.” (I believe German has a similar insultingly-polite construction: “Wollen der Herr bitte Platz nehmen.”) It seems to me that the use of the pure title as a form of direct address is largely gone in American English, with the exceptions of Speaker of the House, President, and Vice President, who are still “Madame Speaker” or “Mr. [Vice] President”. Other public servants typically retain their office in addition to their surname, such as “Governor Smith”, “Senator Jones”, or “Secretary Green”.

In addition to public service, there are still a handful of other environments where titles are still used. Off the top of my head, I can think of religion (“Reverend Brown”), academia (“Professor Wilson”), medicine (“Dr. Miller”), and the military (“General Williams”). But you are not going to hear “Mr. Night Shift Manager” or “Account Representative Harrison”.

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