

○ ADDRESS PRONOUNS IN FRENCH

VARIATION WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE WORKPLACE

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This article examines speakers' perceptions of and attitudes towards address pronoun usage in Paris and Toulouse. The data on which this article is based come from a comparative project based at the University of Melbourne, *Address in some western European languages*, and were generated in focus groups in both Paris and Toulouse, as well as interviews in Paris. It is generally accepted that in France the informal pronominal address form *tu* is used within the family, with close friends and with youngsters, and that the formal address form *vous* is used by adults when addressing strangers. The findings presented here indicate that, outside these general tendencies, individual preferences and negotiation can inform the choice of address pronoun in different ways both within and outside the workplace, with individual variation more common outside the work domain.

INTRODUCTION

An April 2006 article in *Time Europe*, reporting on recent debate in France about the use of the title *mademoiselle*, claimed that use of the informal address pronoun *tu* is on the increase:

Use of the formal *vous* [...] is losing ground swiftly to the more personal *tu* – especially in the workplace. Once reserved for family and close friends, *tu* has become so common – and arguably hip – that some companies, including Microsoft, IKEA and Club Med, have even encouraged its use between workers and executives, arguing it cuts hierarchy and stimulates exchange. (Crumley 2006)

It is worth questioning the seemingly unproblematic link that *Time Europe* makes between what it sees as an increasingly widespread use of informal *tu* within the general population, and the influence of these societal patterns of *tu* use on company policy. Two of the companies that *Time Europe* cites are in fact exemplars of particular corporate

trends that originate outside France – US Microsoft and Swedish IKEA, both of which promote an egalitarian ethos. The case of Club Med, a French-based holiday resort company, is different in that since its inception in the 1950s it has promoted an atmosphere of conviviality and equality between guests and staff through universal *tu*, among other elements. Following a downturn in its fortunes due to changes in consumer demands, Club Med recently shifted its sights to a more sophisticated market, and guests are now addressed with formal *vous* (Coffen 2003; *L'Express*, 27 April 2006). Such changes in client-staff relations may well be reflected in relations between workers and executives. Thus, given the varied backgrounds and workplace cultures of the three companies mentioned in the *Time Europe* article, it is clear that we should examine more carefully the generalisation that *tu* is on the increase in the workplace. This article therefore explores differences between patterns of address use both within and outside the workplace in France, with a focus on workplaces that are domains of *tu* use, and considers whether the use of *tu* is generally becoming more widespread.

In order to examine these questions in more detail, this article reports on some findings of the French component of a large-scale study of changes in the address systems of three European languages, French, German and Swedish, in five countries (France, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Finland) and seven research sites (see Kretzenbacher et al., and Norrby in this issue). The project employed a range of methodologies, including focus groups, interviews, participant observation, and chat groups. For French, the two sites of Paris and Toulouse were chosen to examine regional variation in address usage in an urban setting. The choice of Toulouse was motivated by its position in the south of France in the border regions of the French state and in theory far from the influence of Parisian norms, a location therefore where distinct norms of address usage might be in operation.

BRIEF BACKGROUND TO ADDRESS PRONOUNS IN FRENCH

Language has long been monitored and regulated in France, but it seems that address pronoun usage is more liberal than language norms would indicate. It is certainly the case that in recent times the address pronoun system has evolved: changes in social attitudes after the student revolts of 1968, for example, were reflected in the younger generation's greater use of informal *tu* than was the case among the older generation (e.g. Maley 1974). However, *vous* made a reappearance as the 1970s wore on (Coffen 2002, 235). More recently, as social relationships have become more informal in France, use of *tu* has become more widespread (Peeters 2004). Currently, reciprocal *tu* is used among close family and friends (see Gardner-Chloros 1991; Havu 2005; Hughson 2001, among

others); *tu* is also the norm for relations between people of equal status and who have known each other for a certain length of time (Coffen 2002, 235). *Vous* remains a key element of the address system and is still the pronoun of choice in initial encounters between strangers and between people who want to avoid familiarity (Coffen 2002, 237).

Age is also a crucial factor in address choice in French, both absolute age and relative age of interlocutors (e.g. Béal 1989; Gardner-Chloros 1991; Havu 2005). Greater use of *tu* is associated in particular with the younger age group. Among this younger generation, *tu* can be described as the unmarked form (Havu 2005; Peeters 2004), while *vous* retains its place among the older generations as the unmarked or neutral pronoun (Halmøy 1999, cited in Havu 2005). As the younger generation grows older, their use of *tu* may well decline as they move through the life cycle (e.g. Gardner-Chloros 1991; Havu 2005; Peeters 2004): the shift from adolescence and early twenties to so-called adult life, and entry into the workplace, is often marked by a shift in the range of social relations that an individual maintains, which can lead to a shift in pronoun use towards greater use of *vous*. Conversely, after people retire, they may use *tu* more widely, as they are no longer involved in workplace hierarchies (Gardner-Chloros 1991, 153). Finally, there are other factors that play a role in address choice, namely: the context – for example, *tu* is used more widely in an informal leisure or sports context than in the workplace; the physical appearance of one's interlocutor, and their sex – people use *tu* more readily with individuals of the same sex (e.g. Gardner-Chloros 1991; Havu 2005).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The two focus groups comprised 16 participants in Paris and 11 in Toulouse. Participants represented a cross section of the population, with an age range from 21 to 60 years, an even distribution of men and women, and a range of professions, although the sample was slightly biased towards the professional middle class and students. Participants responded to a short set of open-ended questions from the group moderator, for example, 'Have you noticed any changes in address usage between generations?' and 'How do people address one another at your workplace?'. In the discussion that follows, we will focus on the particular responses from participants, rather than on the broader discourse context in which their responses were situated. The present article also draws on data from 12 interviews with participants in Paris. The interviews are part of a set of what are termed network interviews: in each site, 12 base participants are interviewed, and

they then nominate five members of their own social network (e.g. family, friends, work colleagues, neighbours), who are interviewed in their turn.

RESULTS

THE WORKPLACE: FOCUS GROUP DATA

One Toulouse focus group participant made the observation that there are different kinds of *tu* and different kinds of *vous*: the *vous* that you might use with your boss is a different kind of *vous* from the one that you would use with an old person, outside the work situation. This raises a fundamental distinction between the use of address terms – and particularly address pronouns – within and outside the workplace or institutional setting.

Within the work domain, for many Paris and Toulouse participants, use of *tu* and *vous* is conditioned by workplace hierarchies. A general distinction is made between work colleagues on the one hand, with whom one usually uses reciprocal *tu*, and superiors on the other: depending on the workplace environment, superiors can be addressed by *tu* or *vous*, but in general, *vous* is used with the head of an institution or others in important hierarchical positions. *Vous* is also used with customers and clients. For most participants in this category, the basic rules for *tu* and *vous* in their workplace are clear, and for some there is a distinct shift from the private domain to that of work in terms of the ways in which social relations and social distance are expressed. As François,¹ a Paris participant, states, ‘*dans le travail, c’est bien carré, on change de personnalité dès qu’on met notre veste*’ [at work, it’s really straightforward, we change personality the minute we put on our jackets]. This points to an individual who uses two different systems, one within and one outside the workplace.

However, François, who is in his late twenties and works in the catering business, also underlined the complexities of using the address pronoun system in his workplace: for him, it is ‘constant juggling act’ as he deals with several layers of hierarchy within the business and also with clients:

Donc pour nous par rapport au métier que je fais, le tutoiement, le vouvoiement c’est un jonglage permanent. Parce que tu as des clients qu’il faut vouvoyer, il faut pas manquer de respect. Puis il y a une hiérarchie à respecter aussi. Parce que dans la restauration chacun a son stade. Donc tu vouvoies ton supérieur quoi.

[So for us in relation to the job that I do, using *tu*, using *vous*, it’s really a constant juggling act. Because you’ve got clients who you have

to use *vous* with, you have to show respect. Then there's a hierarchy to respect as well. Because in the catering business everyone has their place. So you use *vous* with your superior.]

He equated the use of *vous* with the showing of respect, both towards clients and towards those higher up in the workplace hierarchy.

This view of *vous* as an expression of respect was not shared by everyone. Sophie, an accountant from Toulouse in her early forties, explicitly stated that her use of *vous* at work was about marking distance between herself and her interlocutor:

Sophie: [...] *le vouvoiement, il me semble que c'est la distance qu'on met entre soi et la personne qu'on a en face, plus que le respect, enfin pour moi. Et on n'a pas du tout une marque de respect quand je vouvoie quelqu'un. C'est plutôt une marque de distance.*

Moderator: *Est-ce que dans ton² travail, c'est comme ça que ça se passe?*

Sophie: *Oui, c'est-à-dire que les gens avec qui j'ai une affinité, je les tutoie. Et les gens avec qui je n'ai pas d'affinité, je les vouvoie, quel que soit l'âge.*

[Sophie: [...] it seems to me that using *vous* is about the distance that you establish between yourself and the person facing you, rather than respect, at least for me. And it's not at all a mark of respect when I use *vous* with someone. It's more a mark of distance.

Moderator: Is that how it happens in your work?

Sophie: Yes, that is, I use *tu* with people who I have an affinity with. And I use *vous* with the people who I don't have an affinity with, regardless of their age.]

Sophie's understanding of 'distance' is thus predicated solely on whether she feels a personal affinity with her interlocutor.

Other participants in both focus groups referred to 'distance' as the main parameter in their choice of *vous* in the workplace. However, use of *vous* was not about a lack of personal affinity, but as a means of avoiding conflict through maintaining a certain professional distance. This was the case for Michel, a Paris bus driver in his early fifties,

who used *vous* with young passengers to avoid any potential conflict. In the Toulouse focus group in particular, there was an extended discussion of the use of *vous* to maintain distance in hierarchical relationships between employees. Fabien, a bookshop assistant in his late twenties, considered that the use of *vous* served a protective function in that the work relationship with a superior was thus free of any personal involvement or engagement:

Le vouvoiement dans une relation hiérarchique c'est aussi une façon de pas vraiment s'impliquer dans la relation. [...] On se vouvoie, il y a tellement de distance entre nous que du coup c'est plus facile de résoudre les problèmes parce qu'il n'y a aucun engagement de l'individu.

[Using *vous* in a hierarchical relationship is also a way of not really becoming involved in the relationship. [...] We use *vous* with each other, there is so much distance between us that it's easier to solve problems because there is absolutely no personal commitment from the individual.]

In summary, from these and other comments from focus group participants, it seems that in what can be called conventional working situations, *tu* and *vous* have unmarked functions where hierarchies are in place: *tu* is the unmarked form used among colleagues, whereas *vous* is the unmarked form between employees and their superiors. As we have seen, in hierarchical work relationships some participants equate *vous* with 'respect', whereas others associate it with what they call 'distance'. In the examples we have presented here, distance is understood in two ways: the use of *vous* creates a discursive and social space that is not crossed and which enables functional and efficient working relations with no affective engagement; it is also simply the expression of a lack of personal affinity with one's interlocutor. These two elements of respect and distance regularly appear in participants' constructions of *vous*, both within and outside the workplace, as we shall see below.

To come back to one of our initial questions, it is clear from some participants' remarks that there do exist workplaces in France which are largely exclusive zones of *tu* use. In the Paris focus group, but not among Toulouse participants, there was lengthy discussion of such work environments. Computing is an area where the use of *tu* seems to be widespread – the Microsoft context noted by *Time Europe*. According to the experience of Mehdi, a computer network technician who took part in the Paris focus group, this use of *tu* is influenced by 'the US way of doing things', presumably related

to the perception that informal and egalitarian company structures and relations characterise the IT area in the States:

Ben disons que, on se tutoie tous, à part le PDG. On tutoie tout le monde quoi, nos supérieurs. Tout le monde se tutoie. C'est un peu à l'américaine quoi.

[Well, we all use *tu* with one another, except for the CEO. We use *tu* with everyone, our superiors. Everyone uses *tu*. It's a bit like the US way of doing things.]

The *tu* workplace seems particularly common in the fashion and music industries, and the media, work environments where the norm is to adopt egalitarian values predicated on *tu*. One participant, Karine, a fashion designer in her late twenties, said that there were no social, age or gender barriers in the fashion and music industries as far as use of pronouns is concerned. The use of *tu* is accompanied by a set of behaviours which serve to reinforce intimacy, including kissing on the cheek, and, as she said later, having physical contact. However, she didn't find it easy to use *tu* with everyone because it forced too great an intimacy:

C'est vrai qu'il y a plein choses qui vont avec le tutoiement. Il y a le fait de – et ça c'est hors âge. C'est tous âges et tous sexes confondus, et toutes nationalités etc., on se tutoie tous [...] on s'embrasse – les hommes s'embrassent, ils se serrent pas la main. [...] j'ai beaucoup de mal parce que c'est pas facile en fait forcément, de tutoyer tout le monde, parce que ça fait, laisser des barrières ou ça met une proximité, qui est un peu, de la promiscuité finalement. Et c'est très artificiel.

[It's true that there are lots of things that go with using *tu*. There's the fact that – and this is with all age groups and all genders and all nationalities, etc, we all use *tu* with one another [...] we kiss – the men kiss, they don't shake hands. [...] I have a lot of difficulty with it because it's not necessarily easy in fact to use *tu* with everyone, because it means, dropping barriers or it creates a certain closeness, which is a little, which is too intrusive in the end. And it's very artificial.]

Karine went on to say that the use of *tu* underlines the notion of fashion and music being at the margins, contexts in which one can 'be a little crazy' as she said – in other words,

one operates outside the conventional norms of reciprocal *vous* use which might normally mark social relations between employee and client in a service encounter or between employees in a hierarchical relation. It is worth noting that the use of *tu*, which is unmarked in this workplace context as a whole, can in fact be a marked practice for an individual within that workplace. In Karine's case, the affective aspects of reciprocal *tu* use do not necessarily sit well with some of her interactions in the work domain.

THE WORKPLACE: INTERVIEW DATA

The question of particular workplaces that are domains of *tu* use was explicitly raised in the interviews: participants were asked what they thought of companies such as international furniture retailer IKEA, founded in Sweden, who require that their employees use *tu* in their stores in France. Swedish norms of address use, where the equivalent T form, *du*, is extremely widely used, are thus being transferred to other European contexts in which the corresponding distribution of T and V can be significantly different. The majority of the twelve participants whose interviews are reported on here saw the imposition of *tu* in the workplace as wholly or partially negative. Only two participants viewed it in purely positive terms, including Diane, a switchboard operator in her late twenties:

Diane: *C'est peut-être pour installer un confort de confiance. Si c'est comme ça dans leurs entreprises, si c'est dit dès le départ. Je pense que les gens qui travaillent pour cette société, ils tutoient d'office et puis, voilà! C'est comme ça.*

Moderator: *Tu penses que ça apporte quelque chose ou que c'est mieux?*

Diane: *Oui, qu'il y a plus de convivialité. Surtout que ce soit du plus haut gradé au moins haut. Au moins ils se disent tous 'tu' et comme ça [...] tous pareils, en fait. C'est plus équitable.*

[Diane: Perhaps it's to establish a climate of confidence. If it's like that in their companies, if it's said right from the start. I think that people who work for that company use *tu* automatically, and there you are! That's how it is.

Moderator: Do you think that it adds something or that it's better?

Diane: Yes, that there's more friendliness. Especially if it's from the highest ranks to the lowest. At least everyone says *tu* which means [...] everyone's the same, in fact. It's more equitable.]

The positive aspects that Diane mentioned – the atmosphere of confidence and the more equitable nature of *tu* relationships – were mentioned by other participants, but they also pointed to the drawbacks. One participant, Thierry, felt that imposing *tu* was hypocritical, in that behind the appearance of friendliness there were the same conflicts; another, Didier, pointed to the fact that the workplace could become too friendly, with the boss no longer recognising any limits; and Sylvie considered that one possible effect of working in a *tu* workplace would be that you got so used to using *tu* that you would use *tu* with everyone. Finally, Laetitia explained that enforcing *tu* in the workplace was as if '*on utilisait la langue pour essayer d'effacer les inégalités sociales, des inégalités qui sont par ailleurs réelles*' [language was being used to erase social inequalities, inequalities which are in other respects real]. She went on to say that if people are too involved in work relationships, which she saw as the consequence of using *tu*, it could be risky for the person who is the inferior in the work hierarchy.

OUTSIDE THE WORKPLACE: FOCUS GROUP DATA

As we have seen, at work the focus of attention among a number of participants was on the use of *vous* and its function in maintaining a certain social distance, particularly in relation to superiors. However, outside the workplace, it is clear that address pronoun behaviour is more complex. Within the family circle and with close friends, the pronoun of choice is *tu*. In other relationships, relative age of speakers is the most obvious factor affecting address choice, but there are other factors, as we shall see, including the notion of perceived commonalities between interlocutors.

Participants in Paris were in agreement that in encounters between strangers, *vous* is as a general rule the unmarked term (cf. Halmøy 1999). As one Paris participant puts it: '*si on sait pas, on vouvoie d'office parce que c'est plus facile. C'est neutre en fait. Le vouvoiement il est très neutre finalement, il est «on met une distance», «on se connaît pas bien», etc.*' [if you don't know, you use *vous* automatically because it's easier. It's neutral in fact. Using *vous* is very neutral, it's 'we're establishing a certain distance', 'we don't know each other well', etc.]. There seems in fact to be relatively few cases where people have difficulty in choosing an address pronoun. A Paris participant explained that in fact the difficult part is in deciding when to shift from *vous* to *tu*:

le 'tu' est plus compliqué que le 'vous'. Le 'vous' c'est d'emblée. Tu connais pas, tu rencontres quelqu'un, c'est automatiquement, c'est le 'vous'. C'est après, savoir quand le 'vous' devient le 'tu'. C'est là.

[*tu* is more complicated than *vous*. *Vous* is from the outset. You don't know someone, you meet them, it's automatically *vous*. It's afterwards, knowing when *vous* becomes *tu*. That's where [it's difficult].]

Part of deciding whether and when to shift from *vous* to *tu* has to do with personal affinity with one's interlocutor. This element was already noted by Brown and Gilman (1960, 258) in their study 'The pronouns of power and solidarity', in which they stated that '[t]he similarities that matter [in the use of mutual T] seem to be those that make for like-mindedness or similar behaviour dispositions. These will ordinarily be such things as political membership, family, religion, profession, sex and birthplace' (see discussion in Svennevig 1999, 28-29). It also corresponds to Kallmeyer's *gemeinsame Lebenswelt* or 'perceived commonalities', which includes interests, affiliations such as being members of the same club, attitudes, and place of residence (Kallmeyer 2003). The Paris moderator summed up the general consensus on this point as follows:

à partir du moment où on se reconnaît un peu dans la personne, ou on reconnaît certains codes, ou on se dit, il y a de grandes chances pour que je partage quelque chose, qu'on vient du même univers, on a peut-être plus de facilité à tutoyer.

[from the moment you recognise yourself a little in the other person, or you recognise certain codes, or you say to yourself, it's very likely that I share something, that we come from the same universe, you will perhaps find it easier to use *tu*.]

Various participants in both groups talked about this feeling of affinity, which can include factors such as physical appearance. Mathieu, a 22-year-old arts student, said that a young person like himself with dreadlocks would take it badly if Mathieu addressed them with *vous*:

Mathieu: *Pour moi c'est pas par rapport à l'âge. Je sais pas, disons, un tiers des cas, je vouvoierai la personne. Ça dépend aussi de la personne, si elle a l'air tranquille, qui demande pas beaucoup de marques de respect, on va dire. [...]*

Moderator: *Est-ce que, par exemple, l'apparence va jouer?*

Mathieu: *Oui, carrément. L'apparence, quelqu'un à qui je vais demander mon chemin, quelqu'un qui a des dreads comme moi, voilà, cette personne va le prendre mal si je le vouvoie, à mon avis. Et quelqu'un qui est vachement bien sapé, même s'il est même un peu plus vieux que moi, mais pas énormément, je vais peut-être le vouvoyer.*

[Mathieu: For me it's not about age. I don't know, let's say, in a third of cases, I will use *vous* with the person. It depends as well on the person, if they seem quiet, they don't ask for many signs of respect, you could say. [...]]

Moderator: Does, for example, appearance play a role?

Mathieu: Yes, absolutely. Appearance, someone who I'm going to ask directions from, someone who has dreadlocks like me, well that person is going to take it badly if I use *vous* with them, I reckon. And someone who is really well dressed, even if they're only a little older than me, not a lot, I'm maybe going to use *vous* with them.]

Fabien echoed this sentiment, but described the exchange in terms of his interlocutor 'provoking' the use of *tu*. Indeed, the reaction of one's interlocutor was deemed an important element in address pronoun choice by a small number of participants. The question of who initiates the choice of address pronoun was taken up further by the Toulouse group. Raphaël and Fabien, both in their late 20s, made a distinction between those who 'give', those who 'receive', and those who do both:

Raphaël: *Il y a des personnes comme ça. Il y a des personnes qui le donnent et des personnes qui le reçoivent.*

Fabien: *Et les deux aussi.*

Raphaël: *Oui. Donner et recevoir, pareil.*

Fabien: *Tu l'impose ou tu le suis, quoi.*

[Raphaël: There are people like that. There are people who give it and people who receive it.

Fabien: And who do both as well.

Raphaël: Yes. Giving and receiving.

Fabien: You either impose it or you follow it.]

Anne, a philosophy student in her early twenties, would be classified as a ‘receiver’. She said that for her whether she is called *vous* or *tu* does not bother her; what is important is the person facing her and their expectations. It seems that, for Anne, the choice of address pronoun is related not to respect or marking distance, but rather to accommodating to her interlocutor’s address pronoun choice. Isabelle agreed, but chose a different way of expressing what occurs: she saw it as the other imposing *vous*, whereas Anne, perhaps because of her lack of experience – she is eight years younger than Isabelle, who is a primary teacher – simply waited for the other to choose:

Anne: *J’ai vraiment l’impression que c’est quelque chose qui, enfin, vient pas de moi, que je veux pas vouvoyer ou tutoyer les gens. Et c’est vraiment plus que c’est l’autre et pas moi. Par exemple, ça me dérange pas qu’on me vouvoie dans le travail ou qu’on me tutoie. Pour moi, ça n’a pas une valeur particulière, mais par contre, celui d’en face, il attend un vouvoiement et c’est pour ça que je le mets, parce que c’est la forme. Mais pour moi c’est plus une forme que vraiment un choix personnel. Peut-être c’est parce que pour l’instant, je n’ai pas eu trop à me poser la question [...].*

Isabelle: *Moi aussi, j’ai cette impression que c’est l’autre qui impose le vouvoiement.*

[Anne: I really have the impression that it’s something that doesn’t come from me, that I don’t want to use *vous* or *tu* with people. And it’s really more that it’s the other person and not me. For example, it doesn’t bother me if people use *vous* or *tu* with me at work. For me, it doesn’t have a particular value, but the person facing me is expecting *vous* and that’s why I use it, because that’s the expectation. But for me it’s more a convention than a personal choice. Perhaps that’s because up till now I haven’t really had to think about it. [...]

Isabelle: Me too, I’ve got that impression that it’s the other person who imposes *vous*.]

A final point concerns the question of whether the use of *tu* is becoming more widespread. The question of change did not come up in any great detail in the focus groups. However, according to Karine, in the fashion industry, although she considered that young people used *tu* with each other more easily, as soon as questions of hierarchy or respect came into play, young people still used *vous*. For her, *‘c’est une erreur de croire que les jeunes ne vouvoient plus’* [it’s an error to believe that young people no longer use *vous*]. In Toulouse, in contrast, several participants explicitly stated that *tu* use is becoming more frequent, and a minority generally preferred to use *tu* or had the habit of using *tu*. This is reflected in the comments of Raphaël, who considered that *tu* and *vous* are no longer so codified, and that *tu* is encroaching on the ‘public sphere’:

Raphaël: *J’ai l’impression qu’avant c’était beaucoup plus codifié, quoi, le ‘tu’ et le ‘vous’. [...] Tu avais ‘vous’ pratiquement tout le temps et ‘tu’ dans le cercle privé. Maintenant, le ‘tu’, j’ai l’impression qu’il s’est élargi [...] beaucoup sur le cercle publique. Sauf les gens qu’on connaît absolument pas qui, eux, seront dans le ‘vous’, quoi.*

[Raphaël: I have the impression that before it was much more codified, *tu* and *vous*. [...] You had *vous* practically all the time and *tu* in the private sphere. Now, I have the impression that the use of *tu* has extended [...] a lot into the public sphere. Except for people who you don’t know at all who would still be *vous*.]

OUTSIDE THE WORKPLACE: INTERVIEW DATA

The question of possible changes over the past 10 or 15 years in the way people address each other was asked of interview participants. The majority responded in the affirmative. The following came up as areas of change: greater use of *tu* by young people, both among themselves and with old people; greater use of *tu* by the police, as an insult; more informal relations at work reflected in less use of *vous*; and use of *tu* by television presenters on chat shows aimed at a younger audience. Of note in participant comments are the following. First, Diane was concerned that youngsters seemed to be using *tu* increasingly with people older than them. She felt that if children start to use *vous* later and later, then they would also show respect at a much later stage, *vous* correlating for her with the notion of respect. Second, Sylvie had a particular way of presenting the downside of what she saw as the spread of *tu*:

Même pour dire [...] ‘vous me faites chier’, maintenant c’est ‘tu me fais chier’. [...] Bon moi je pense que ça peut amplifier les heurts. [...] Si je connais pas la personne je vais l’engueuler en la vouvoyant.

[Even to say [...] ‘you’re [V] pissing me off’, nowadays it’s ‘you’re [T] pissing me off’. Well I think that it can intensify the conflict. [...] If I don’t know the person I am going to tell them off using *vous*.]

For Sylvie, then, the overriding factor in the use of *vous* is the fact that you do not know your interlocutor. In emotional or anger-filled situations of communication with strangers, insults formed with *tu* could have a double impact, coming from the insult itself and from the added insult of using the familiar pronoun *tu* with a stranger.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is clear from the data we have collected so far that there are (a) situations in which *tu* is the unmarked form of address – that is, with family and close friends; and (b) situations in which *vous* is the unmarked form – that is, with strangers and in particular hierarchical work relationships.

In response to the questions asked in the introduction, first, there do exist particular workplaces in France that are domains of *tu* use, according to our participants, in particular the computing, fashion and media industries. Individual preferences and negotiation can inform the choice of address pronoun in different ways both within and outside the workplace, with individual variation more common outside the work domain (see Clyne et al. 2006). Second, there is a perception among some of our participants that *tu* is gaining ground on *vous*. Although the Paris focus group participants were not very vocal about this, when the Paris interview participants were explicitly asked about possible changes over the last 10 or 15 years, the majority stated that use of *tu* was more widespread, a perception that was echoed by some Toulouse focus group participants.³ Nevertheless, *vous* still retains a key place in the address system. For some, using *vous* is a way of showing respect, whereas for others it expresses a distance between speaker and interlocutor, and thus does not commit the speaker to any affective engagement, the latter being particularly the case in the workplace.

Furthermore, for a minority of participants, the overriding factor in the choice of address pronoun is simply convergence to their interlocutor’s choice of pronoun. There are a number of ways in which we might understand this phenomenon. First, we could, along with Fabien and Raphaël, accept that some people are ‘givers’ of pronouns, and

some are ‘receivers’ and that these categories are static. We can construct individuals as givers and receivers based on their orientation to others in terms of their active or passive participation in verbal exchanges and/or of their understanding of the power relation between themselves and their interlocutor, based on criteria such as age, appearance, or status relationship. Second, convergence to one’s interlocutor’s address patterns might be unstable over time. In other words, convergence might mark a transitional phase between address patterns in young adulthood and those which mark full integration into mature adult life, during which uncertainty about appropriate address usage is translated into a ‘wait and see’ approach, as well as avoidance of address pronouns altogether. Finally, the fact that some individuals choose their address forms spontaneously, in response to their reading of their interlocutor, might simply demonstrate the dynamic, fluid and contingent nature of conversation. This area will be investigated further as new data become available for analysis.⁴

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Participants’ names have been changed to protect their anonymity.
- ² The Toulouse moderator addressed the focus group informants with *tu*.
- ³ In a recent article on address pronoun use in French in Paris, Metz, Toulouse and Lyon, Havu (2006) found, among other things, that at work participants in Toulouse were more ready to use *tu* than their Parisian counterparts, who showed more hesitation over pronoun choice than speakers in the other cities. In addition, participants in Toulouse used *tu* more often with strangers who were younger or the same age than did those in Paris. Havu’s study is part of a larger project on address pronoun use in French, Italian and Spanish based in the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Helsinki (see also Havu 2005, among others).
- ⁴ My thanks go to the Australian Research Council for funding this project; to research assistants Emmanuelle Guérin, Jo-anne Hughson and Elizabeth Ober for collecting, transcribing and coding the data; and the two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments and suggestions.

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