

THE PRONOUNS OF ADDRESS IN DUTCH AS A MIRROR OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PEOPLE

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Introduction

In 1960 Brown and Gilman studied the pronouns of address, especially in five Indo-European languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. In the second paragraph of their article they summarize the contents of their publication as follows:

This paper is divided into five major sections. The first three of these are concerned with the semantics of the pronouns of address. By semantics we mean covariation between the pronoun used and the objective relationship existing between speaker and addressee. The first section offers a general description of the semantic evolution of the pronouns of address in certain European languages. The second section describes semantic differences existing among the pronouns of French, German and Italian. The third section proposes a connection between social structure, group ideology and the semantics of the pronoun. The final two sections of the paper are concerned with expressive style, by which we mean covariation between the pronoun used and the semantics of the pronoun. The first of these sections shows that a man's consistent pronoun style gives away his class status and his political views. The last section describes the ways in which a man may vary his pronoun style from time to time so as to express transient moods and attitudes. In this section it is also proposed that the major expressive meanings are derived from the major semantic rules. (253-4).

Brown and Gilman inform us they had only two informants from Holland, as they call the Netherlands, and they do not mention Flanders. The development and the social problems of these pronouns have interested me for years. I was confronted with these problems when I was a child, as my father and mother originated from different regions of the Netherlands. This paper gives additional material to the data of Brown and Gilman on the Dutch language and suggests finer distinctions, and also examines their social implications. Emphasis is laid on the most important periods in the past: the Middle Ages and the 17th and 19th centuries. For these periods, of course, we have only written data, so the discussion has had to be restricted to the written language. But the paper closes with some remarks about

research into the situation today.

The history of Dutch pronouns of address can be divided into three periods:

1. A time during which the pronoun *du* was used for the singular and the pronoun *gy* for the plural (Middle Ages);
2. The gradual development of a new pronoun *u* both for the singular and the plural (from the 16th century onwards);
3. The development and expansion of the pronoun *je* - in grammars often spelled as *jij* - especially for the singular (the entire period of middle Dutch and modern Dutch, down to the present time). The history of these pronouns is extremely complicated, not only because the above-mentioned periods overlap but also because many of the aforesaid words have two meanings or even more. Our knowledge of these pronouns is limited because the sources are often very difficult to compare; the regional origins of these pronouns are limited and different, as is the social status; information about spoken language is lacking, and if there seems to be such information it may have been distorted by the medium of written language; the picture of social relations in former times is distorted by our modern and often arbitrary viewpoint. Especially in the past, much has been published on the phonetic/phonological development of several pronouns; only during the last decade has more attention been paid to their contents and functions.

The period of du and gj.

The only preserved manuscripts in the Middle Dutch vernacular date from the late Middle Ages. In the nominative, the pronoun for the singular is written as *du*, which must originally have been pronounced as [du] and later as [di]. The pronunciation of *gy* is uncertain, and I shall return to this problem later. Both pronouns also had a second function, which was that of indicating the relations between people; *du* was the pronoun of solidarity, and *gy* the pronoun of distance. Lulofs (1967) has attempted to explain the varying use of these pronouns in the light of personal relationships taking his examples from *Van den Vos Reynaerde*. Bruun the bear comes to summon Reinaert the fox on behalf of the king of the animals. He does so with the following words:

sidi in huus, Reinaert?
 525 Ik bem Bruun, des coninx bode.
 Die hevet gesworen bi sinen gode:
 Ne coomdi niet ten ghedinghe,
 Ende ic u niet voor mi bringhe,

Sidi is a contraction of *syt gy*, *coomdi* a contraction of *coomt ghy*, and *u* is the accusative form of this pronoun. We are not dealing with a plural function here, because only one person is being addressed. We are, however, dealing with a distance function: The king's messenger vis-à-vis the accused. Subsequently Reinaert says he has eaten too much, and Bruun the bear asks him:

562 Reinaert, wat aetstu? wat?
Aetstu is a contraction of *ates du*. According to Lulofs, this instance of style shifting in Bruun's speech indicates the latter's desire for rapprochement. He is reducing the distance, and in line 581 he even calls Reinaert *soete neve*, thus implying kinship with him and his relatives, and reducing the distance even further.

The gradual development of a new pronoun

At the end of the 16th century, the pronoun *du* was no longer usable. When Marnix van Sint Aldegonde was asked to make a Bible translation in 1594, he wanted to rehabilitate *du* but this proved to be impossible. The history of *du* and *gy* runs parallel to that of the English pronouns *thou* and *you*, both with regard to the period during which the changes took place and with regard to the nature of these changes. But afterwards the developments of the Dutch and the English pronouns diverged. Whereas the English language limits itself to the use of one pronoun and expresses solidarity and distance by other linguistic means, the Dutch language has developed a new pronoun. The original form and the complications of usage have led to a situation in which, after four centuries, the word still has not been fully integrated into standard Dutch. The new pronoun *u*, as it exists today, is an abbreviation of the original *Uwe Edelheid* or *Uwe Edele* (=Your Honor), which appears in written language at the end of the 16th century (with the verb in the third person). In this written language it is used along with the older *gy*. Linguists assume that this word had meanwhile come to be pronounced as [gi], but in fact the different ways in which it is spelled: *gy*, *ghy*, *gij*, *ghij*, *jy*, *jij*, etc: suggest that the pronunciation was by no means standardized. But this is a bigger question than can be dealt with in this paper.

One of the problems is the reduction of *Uwe Edelheid* to *u*. It is clear from letters that at first the full pronoun was used by people belonging to the upper classes. Around the middle of the 17th century it is also used by

the well-to-do middle class citizens, and at the end of the century it is in common usage in those circles. Because, in the long run, it mainly came to be written in its abbreviated form as *UE*, it is assumed that the lower classes, trying to imitate the upper classes, pronounced it as *Uwée* [ywe] or as [yve]. It seems peculiar that this was shortened to *u*, considering the stress on the second syllable. One would have expected the shortened form *wée* [we] or [ve]. But Dutch, even in its oldest sources, had an accusative form of the pronoun *ghy* which was also *u*, and that might have supported the development towards *u*. Muller (1926) maintained that the present *u* was a direct continuation of that accusative form, as part of a progress which has taken place in many languages (the Italian *Lei*, the German *Sie*, etc.), and which is still taking place in Dutch. The rise of *hun* as the nominative plural at the expense of *zij* is indicative of this continuing process.

In letters by men of standing, we also find the pronoun *ghy*, but that is considerably less formal. It is used to address younger people and children, intimate friends and relatives, and those lower in the social hierarchy like servants. In drama the pronoun is also spelled with a *j*, which is rare in letters. Stoett (1930) and Verdenius (1924) advanced the theory that the spelling with *gh* is indicative of a guttural or velar fricative, whereas the spelling with *g* is more indicative of a palatal pronunciation which eventually was to lead to the pronunciation with a palatal fricative, which is now standard Dutch and spelled as *je* and as *jij* in its stressed form [jɛi].

An analysis of the spelling in plays, especially of Bredero's plays, suggests that the spelling with *gh* represents the most formal use of this pronoun and that the spelling with *g* or *j* points to less formal usage. The *gh* indicates a pronunciation different from that of *g* or *j*; it is likely that individual and regional differences in pronunciation were expressed in this way, which ranged from palatal fricatives to variants which were almost velar fricatives. From the foregoing we may conclude that the Dutch of the 17th century and afterwards had three levels: the greatest distance was indicated by the different forms of *u*, the highest degree of solidarity by *ge/je* and *ghy* was used in between. Of all these different forms, only *ghy* could be used for the plural. *Uwe Edelheid* would have to be declined to *Uwe Edelheden*, and in my view the use of *je/ge* for the plural was extremely rare.

The development and the expanding power of the pronoun je [jə].

From the foregoing it has become clear that both

during the Middle Ages and afterwards the functions of personal pronouns expressed relations rather than number. *Gij* can be used in the singular and plural alike and the semantic meaning is sufficiently clear from the context. The same applies to *u*, once it has in its shortened form ceased to express number. In the Middle Ages we may discern two social strata; in later times, from the development of *u* onwards, we may discern three. The address in the third person has survived into our own time, the longest in Frisian. In that case, for example, one uses the name of the profession of the addressee, with the verb in the third person singular or plural. For example: "Would father mind doing this for me?" "Would the ladies mind sitting down?" This usage is rapidly disappearing in Frisian, but also in other regions, and the situation which existed during the Middle Ages, namely that of pronouns indicating two social strata, is becoming the most common again.

Both in terms of contents (singular and plural) and in terms of the pronoun's function to indicate distance, the pronoun *gij* has changed least of all. Whereas after the emergence of *u* it was used for some time to express a smaller distance than the new pronoun, it became again probably in the 19th century or already in the 18th century, the pronoun expressing the greatest distance. This must have been due to the fact that the lower classes got hold of the new pronoun, thus robbing it of its elitist character. Nowadays *gij* is still used occasionally in solemn speeches and writings, when the speaker or writer clearly considers *u* too common. *U* happens to be the word you use to address anyone you do not know, anyone you meet for the first time, or anyone you assume to appreciate a certain degree of distance; in short, there are many reasons for using it.

Nowadays, solidarity in standard Dutch is increasingly being expressed by means of the pronoun *je*. It has already been observed that, in etymological terms, it is the same word as *gij*; it is possible that the phonetic realisation has changed but also that the pronunciation varied in different regions. Our oldest writings are of southern origin, where people still use *gij* as the only pronoun of its kind; that is to say, both for singular and plural, for distance and for solidarity. South of the great rivers in The Netherlands and in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, the pronunciation of the *g* is more palatal than in the north. There, the *g* is a velar fricative and the palatal fricative is spelled as *j*. So standard Dutch has two pronouns: *u* for distance, used in the singular and the plural; *je* for solidarity in the singular, and for the plural *jullie* (=je lieden) is used, which usage is comparable to that in the south where *gullie*, *gellie* etc. are used for the plural.

All this might create the impression that the Dutch language is developing in the direction of the English language which uses *you* under all circumstances, whereas other languages like French and German draw a distinction, especially between distance and solidarity. In these languages too a development is taking place towards a more widespread use of the pronoun of solidarity. The development of the Dutch language has gone further, but it has not yet reached the stage of the English language. One cannot be sure whether this stage will ever be reached. Much will depend on the way society develops. The differences between the social classes have become smaller or have disappeared in many respects: financial circumstances, living conditions, lifestyle, leisure time activities, etc. In some circles the use of *je* seems to serve as a warning: I consider myself your equal. I have the impression that this tendency is strongest among young people in Amsterdam; they have also developed strategies to sound the expectations of the addressee very quickly.

These are the general tendencies of the development of the pronouns of address. For the Middle Ages an example has been provided from the *Reinaert* epic. In order to illustrate the second period (the 17th century) during which we could discern three degrees of distance, I shall turn to the letters and plays of that period.

Power and solidarity

Brown and Gilman have related the use of the pronouns of address to the concepts of power and solidarity. I have tried to find out if and to what extent such relationships can be found in Dutch writings of the 17th century, and my conclusion is that the words 'distance' and 'solidarity' more accurately reflect the nature of the relationships involved. In order to gain more insight into this matter I limited my first investigation to authentic letters. The style of these letters depends on the writer, who chooses a style according to the addressee. The author's signature at the bottom of the letter is evidence for us that he has taken full responsibility for the contents of the letter. The letter writers of the first half of the 17th century were governors and other people in leading positions. It is only their *written* style which we can analyse, but at the start of my investigation this may be considered an advantage rather than a disadvantage. The letters of the Dutch poet P.C. Hooft have been my starting point. From the surviving manuscripts of his work, as well as from other information about him, it is clear that he used language in a most careful manner.

After some hesitation in the beginning, Hooft soon develops a fixed rule for himself: he uses the pronoun

UE to address all those who belong to his own milieu, his wives, his friends, and those of the same rank as himself and his fellow governors; the pronoun of address for those in high position depends on the function of the addressee, for example, *Uwe Genade* (=Your Grace) for the Prince of Orange, *weledelgestrenghe* for Huygens from the moment the latter entered the Prince's service; to those in lower positions he writes *ghij* and sometimes *UL*, which is presumably an abbreviation of *Uwer Liefde* (=Your Love). I discussed these nuances at length in a paper I published in 1982. That same paper also contains the results of the comparison with other letters.

A second investigation was aimed at the problems concerning the pronoun variants *ghij*, *gij* and *jij*. On the basis of an analysis of different styles in Bredero's writings, Verdenius had argued (1924) that *ghij* appertains to a more formal style than *gij* and *jij*. But others had accused Bredero of sloppiness and arbitrariness. A careful analysis of Bredero's plays shows that it is likely that changes in spelling from *gh* to *g* and the other way around can in many cases be explained as a style shift or, to put it differently, the changes embody the style shift (Daan 1985). More or less by coincidence, it was also found that in *Rodd'rick ende Alphonsus*, the first romantic play he wrote, Bredero uses the *jij*-spelling during the first dialogue between two characters, whereas in their second dialogue, 1500 lines later, the spelling is *gy*. This change, which was not corrected in the first dialogue, indicates that the *g*-spelling was considered more appropriate for the sound intended than the *j*-spelling.

Presumably it was only during the 19th century that the pronoun *u* came to be more widely used as a pronoun of address to strangers, to those older and those in a higher position than the speaker. Two studies (Van den Toorn 1977 and Daan 1980) have shown that the use of *u* is diminishing these days, and that the frequency of usage is dependent on the age and the regional origin of the speaker. Possibly it is also determined by other factors, for the Dutch language area comprises several regional languages with a single pronoun of address: *gij* throughout the south, and *jij* in most of the west. In the northeast we still find remnants of the old *du*, although often only as a suffix to the declined verb in inversion. It is precisely there that the indirect form of address is still used most frequently. The fact that the younger generation prefers the use of *je/jij* to *u* is shown nowhere more clearly than in the figures produced by Daan (1980):

	use of <i>je</i> to strangers and those older		
	against %	no opinion %	for %
older generation	66	15	19
students of teacher training college	12	30	58

These figures and those published by Van den Toorn show that there are differences which are dependent not only on age but also on social class and the region of origin. The investigations also reveal that the speakers are by no means always aware of the language variations they produce and that one's choice may be determined by many factors.

I have tried to show that the development of medieval *du* and *gy* to the present-day *jij* and *u* has been largely determined by social relationships, that people have always faced problems in this respect, and that everyone tries to solve these problems in a more or less individual manner. Learning to live with this kind of uncertainty is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of living with language.

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