

German Pronominal Systems in Conflict: The Discursive Negotiation of *du* and *Sie*

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ABSTRACT

Using Delisle's (1986) formulation of two coexisting systems of pronominal address in German (A1 and A2), the present study examines German speakers' discursive negotiation of conflicting social meanings for the informal and formal pronouns "du" and "Sie". Data was collected from ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews conducted with 62 native German speakers during multiple research periods between 1995 and 2006. The present study explores native speakers' metapragmatic talk about their pronoun use in specific communication situations in which they perceived a conflict of differing social meanings. The study addresses a) what distinct social meanings members of each pronominal system apply to the pronouns du and Sie, b) how interlocutors discursively negotiate social meaning misalignments, c) what the communicative consequences are that develop when two differing pronominal systems of social meaning collide in human interaction, and finally, d) what the two systems of meaning reveal about German speakers' views of appropriate and/or desirable relationships within German society.

Keywords: German language, ethnography, social meaning, discursive conflict

In his Editorial Introduction to the Journal, *Language in Society*, Dell Hymes (1972) calls for researchers in sociolinguistics to take "social meaning as a starting point" (p. 6). After reading this call, several questions come to mind: Of what importance is the study of social meaning in general, and is the call to study social meaning one that scholars of human communication should find worthy of pursuit? Is social meaning purely a cognitive occurrence in the heads of interlocutors with little or no significance to the field of

communication, or does it, in fact, reveal something very real about the discursive choices speakers make and the strategies they employ in daily interactions?

Keith Basso (1979) in his book *Portraits of "The Whiteman"* defines social meaning as those utterances interlocutors employ that "express [something] about themselves and their situated relationships with others" (p. 17). He contrasts this with a second type of nonreferential meaning he calls cultural meaning. Cultural meanings or textual meanings transcend the social realm and utter certain cultural themes that are available in the respective code. Basso emphasizes that this distinction is purely an analytical one, but the separation of social meanings and cultural meanings distinguishes those metacommunicative messages "that communicate about the structural and affective components of situated social relationships" and "those that communicate about the conceptual content of cultural symbols" (p. 99).

Indeed, in every interaction in which interlocutors participate, social meaning plays a central role. Each time an interlocutor enters a conversation with another, she or he takes into account who she or he is in relation to the person with whom she or he is speaking (see Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson 1967). Social meaning, or as I will define it for the purposes of the present study, an expression of understanding of self, other, and the relationship between self and other, either motivates, guides, constrains, and/or restricts communication in any given interaction. If the social meanings are similar and shared between interlocutors, communication will have a base on which it can flow smoothly. If this understanding is not shared, miscommunication and misunderstanding are more likely to occur. This point is made by Blom and Gumperz (1972) when they write, "Effective communication requires that speakers and audiences agree both on the meaning of words and on the social import or values attached to choice of expression" (p. 417). The social value attached to an utterance is what Blom and Gumperz refer to as *social significance* or *social meaning*.

If we accept that social meanings are at the very base of most daily interactions and are of general importance, then the question follows: What implications, if any, does the study of social meanings have for understanding the nature of human communication? Is the available system of social meanings that can be linguistically expressed infinite or finite? If there is a limited known set of linguistically expressible social meanings, then is this set universal, or do there exist very different systems of social meaning distinctive to particular cultures? The line of research implied by these questions has important practical

and theoretical implications for intercultural communication. If social meanings are based in culturally-distinctive systems, then it is of vital importance to uncover these systems of social meaning. If researchers of language can grasp the distinctive systems of social meaning available from culture to culture, then through comparative studies, such researchers could ultimately gain important insight into the role that culture plays in the differing ways human beings relate to one another through the communicative choices that they make.

In this study I examine social meaning in the German context, i.e., as it is communicatively expressed, negotiated and understood by German native speakers. Specifically, I focus on various examples taken from a more extensive, long-term study on social meaning that provide insight into the varying systems that appear to coexist and, at times, conflict in the daily communication of German speakers. I hope that by examining German speakers' talk about their language use and the kinds of social relationships they understand themselves to be discursively enacting, we will gain insight into culture's role in the communicative choices interlocutors make in their daily interactions.

PRONOUNS OF ADDRESS AS A COMMUNICATIVE RESOURCE

Social meaning between interlocutors is not purely a cognitive occurrence. It is in and through specific communicative resources that we express our understandings of who we are in relation to others. Because social meanings are often intertwined with interlocutors' communicative choices, in order to study social meaning, it is imperative to choose a communicative resource on which to focus one's research. There exists a variety of communicative means through which social meanings are expressed, such as speech events, speech genres, tone of voice and other nonverbal behaviors, etc.

For instance, if I engage in the speech genre of *joking* with another individual, one understanding that I am expressing is that I am in a relationship with this person that permits me to joke with him/her. What my joking says to this other person is twofold. First, the joke itself, i.e., its content, whether or not it was funny, etc., will be of some importance to the person. Second, what my joking says to him/her about how I perceive our relationship to each other will also have an effect on the subsequent communication between us. If the other individual does not perceive our relationship in the same way that I do, i.e., that we are close enough to be joking, then subsequent communicative moves on this person's part may include ignoring the

joke, or verbally and/or nonverbally communicating anger to me. The communicative resource is the speech genre “joking,” and what results in and from this resource is an expression of social meaning between the interlocutors. This displays the direct link between the communicative resource and expressed and expressible social meanings between speakers.

One communicative resource that effectively expresses social meaning is the personal pronoun, particularly as it is used in personal address. Danziger (1976) states that there are many concrete examples of the presentation of interpersonal relationships in interlocutors’ daily communication; however, he believes that “the analysis of the rules of personal address probably constitutes the most developed part of this field of study” (p. 38). Due to the abundance of terms of address studies, with many focusing on pronouns of address, there is already a large corpus of knowledge documented about pronominal systems in a variety of languages.

In his book *Social Psychology*, Brown (1965) proposes a very specific link between pronouns of address and social meaning. Based on various pronominal studies, including the seminal Brown and Gilman (1960), Brown (1965) proposes that all expressions of social meaning can be mapped onto a two-dimensional space with the vertical axis representing power and the horizontal axis representing solidarity. According to Brown’s theory, all expressions of social meaning in any language can be found somewhere on the power/solidarity axis. In other words, there exist two semantic dimensions of social meaning that are universal to all languages.

Brown and Gilman (1960) define the power semantic as asymmetrical. In order for power to be an issue, “both [interlocutors] cannot have power in the same area of behavior” (p. 255). Further, Brown and Gilman write, “Since the nonreciprocal power semantic only prescribes usage between superior and inferior, it calls for a social structure in which there are unique power ranks for every individual” (p. 256). When an imbalance of power is symbolized in speech, it is usually accomplished by those with more power speaking the informal pronoun and receiving the formal pronoun from those with less power. The solidarity semantic, on the other hand, represents more balance between individuals and is symmetrical. Brown and Gilman (1960) write, “The similarities that matter [for the solidarity semantic] seem to be those that make for like-mindedness or similar behavior dispositions” (p. 258).

Brown (1965) states that address forms in all languages will always be governed by solidarity and power; however, the two underlying dimensions will not always be used in the same way in every language. Brown refers to each dimension as having certain characteristics. For instance, the power semantic will often be based in such characteristics as “physical strength and skill, position in the kinship system, sex, lineage, occupation, wealth, [and] roles in an organization like the army or the church” (p. 55). The characteristics of the solidarity semantic are varied and can take the form of “kinship, identities of age, sex, nationality, similarities of education and occupation, a shared fate, and simply prolonged contact” (p. 57).

Since Brown and Gilman (1960), terms of address have been examined in a wide range of languages such as Chinese (Zhucheng 1991), Dutch (Vandekerckhove 2005), English (Brown and Ford 1961; Ervin-Tripp 1972; Sequeira 1993), Estonian (Keevallik 1999), French (Liddicoat 2006), German (Delisle 1986; Kempf 1985; Winchatz 2001; Belz and Kinginger 2003), Icelandic (Haugen 1975; Paulston 1976), Italian (Bates and Benigni 1975), Javanese (Geertz 1960), Spanish (Covarrubias 2002) and Yiddish (Slobin 1963), to name a few. Other authors have published annotated bibliographies of address term research (Philipsen and Huspek 1985) or produced more encompassing works that examine various aspects of address theory in multiple languages (Mühlhäuser and Harré 1990; Braun 1988).

I have illustrated some of the important implications that the study of social meanings can have for the study of culture and human communication. I have also pointed out the importance of focusing one’s research on a specific communicative resource in order to examine social meanings. The study of personal pronoun usage is an excellent resource for understanding social meaning for several reasons: 1) There already exists a long-standing body of research on personal pronoun usage in many languages in which similarities between personal pronoun choices have been explicated (Banks 1989; Bayer 1979; Brown & Gilman 1960; Covarrubias 2002; Friedrich 1972; Haugen 1975; Kempf 1985; Paulston 1976; Vandekerckhove 2005; Winchatz 2001); 2) Personal pronoun choices in languages where several choices are available to the speakers (e.g., French *tu* and *vous*, Spanish *tu* and *Usted*, German *du* and *Sie*) are a very direct resource for speakers to display their understanding of social relations between themselves and others with whom they speak; 3) Interlocutors are often quite aware of the personal pronoun choices that they make in their daily interactions and must constantly interpret the personal pronoun

choices that others make when talking with them. Since personal pronouns are regularly employed by speakers in their daily interactions, it is a linguistic unit that is readily accessible to the researcher and into whose systems and meanings the interlocutors themselves have much insight.

In the next section I turn to the work of Bayer (1979) and Delisle (1986) who have been instrumental in explicating two coexisting systems of pronominal address in German. A closer examination of the two systems will build a foundation for the examples and analyses I then provide from my own data corpus.

TWO SYSTEMS OF GERMAN PRONOMINAL ADDRESS

There exists a rather limited number of terms of address studies focusing specifically on the German language. In 1979, Klaus Bayer published an article that examined the uses of *du* and *Sie* among German speakers in German universities (*du* is the informal, and *Sie* is the formal second-person pronoun). He proposed that there exist two pronominal systems among German speakers, each with very different standard forms of address and semantic dimensions. Delisle (1986), who extended Bayer's work, provided an excellent summary of his two distinct pronominal systems, referred to as A1 and A2:

- In A1, *Sie* is the standard form of address, used with everybody except the family, close friends, and children under sixteen. The semantic dimensions of A1 are formality, distance, authority, and respect on the one hand and intimacy and informality on the other, where *Sie* generally indicates a formal relationship and *du* an intimate one.
- In A2, *du* is the standard form of address. As in A1, it is used with the family, close friends, and children, but beyond these groups its usage does not necessarily reflect a close relationship between speaker and addressee. Rather, it can signal that both belong to the same group, sharing the same interests. In this system, nonmembers of the group are addressed with *Sie*. *Sie* is thus used to label the outsider, to signal nonsolidarity and social distance. (p. 4)

A1 and A2 also differ in respect to “optionality, permanence, reciprocity, and range” (Delisle 1986: 4). One very important distinction is *how* the choice between *du* and *Sie* is made within each system. In the A1 system, this choice is a personal one of the

individuals involved, while the choice between these two pronouns in A2 is “based on an agreement within the group” (p. 4). The distinction between A1 and A2 is made easier if A2 is seen as a subgroup of A1. Delisle (1986) writes, “A2 is especially prevalent in groups which stress solidarity and equality, for example in groups that have a liberal, progressive, socialist, or ‘alternative’ bent” (p. 5). She stresses the importance of the age factor for A2, which she labels as the “under thirty” (p. 5) group. This is an important distinction, as many individuals counted as part of the “older generation” in Germany can be said to be a part of the A1 system and would, for the most part, rarely use the informal *du* pronoun with someone whom they did not know well, simply because this individual is of the same age group. Such an assumption could be considered extremely rude and a violation of the social norms.

A further distinction is made in separating the *du* pronoun into *du1* and *du2*. Delisle (1986) writes, “*Du1* is more permanent than *du2*. *Du1*, once given, is rarely revoked except under special circumstances...” (p. 4). *Du2*, however, is not as permanent as *du1* because it is not based on intimacy but rather on group membership or solidarity. Should this solidarity at some point no longer be valid, it is very difficult for the individual to know if the solidarity *du* (*du2*) is still in effect, or if it no longer applies.

According to Delisle (1986), German speakers are divided into three groups, “those that only use A1, those that only use A2, and those that use both A1 and A2” (p. 5). As I previously stated, many older Germans operate in the A1 system. There could also be those youths who only operate in A2, using what Delisle labels as *Sie2* (with an inherent negative connotation) to label outsiders. Many younger Germans, however, do not employ such an extreme system, but choose between both the A1 and A2 systems “depending on the situation and the persons involved” (Delisle 1986: 5).

Bayer (1979) and Delisle (1986) provide excellent accounts of what the systems of pronominal terms of address in German are and what factors, such as age, group membership, familial ties, etc. play a role in the choices that speakers make. If the two pronominal systems, as described by Bayer (1979) and Delisle (1986) do, in fact, coexist, then there are several questions that can be raised: 1) What social meanings do German speakers express in and through the personal pronouns *du* and *Sie*?; 2) Are speakers aware of differing social meanings when such meanings are communicatively enacted and encountered?; 3) Are there communicative consequences that develop

when two conflicting systems of social meaning collide in human interaction?; and 4) What do the systems of meaning reveal about German speakers differing and, at times, conflicting views of appropriate or desirable relationships within German society? The following analysis attempts to address these and other questions about the communicative influence of culture on the ways people socially relate to one another.

METHOD

The materials for the present paper stem from a larger, long-term study of social meanings and German pronoun usage I have been conducting over the past decade. Data for the present study are based on fieldwork, in-depth interviewing, and written exchanges with native German speakers. Data collection periods took place during a ten-month research stay in 1995-1996 in Landau, Germany¹, during extended visits in 1998, 2001, and 2004 (in the towns of Konstanz, Mosbach, Munich and Speyer), and most recently in 2006 through written correspondence and phone interviews with German native speakers. In-depth, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 62 native German speakers of varying age, gender, occupation, and class. In addition, fieldnotes from participant-observations in both public (cafés, supermarkets, university classrooms, etc.) and private settings were recorded during my time in the above-mentioned locations in Germany.

I engaged in “reflexive interviewing” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 152) with all participants. This allowed me to enter the interview with preset topics; however, the content and direction of each interview were guided by the participants. My goal was to uncover the social relationships each speaker understood herself or himself to be expressing through her or his daily pronoun use. I was also interested in the participants’ perceptions of other speakers’ pronoun use toward them. Because I interviewed individuals, pairs, and groups, there were a total of 34 interviews over 62 individuals lasting between 24 minutes and approximately 2 hours. All interviews were fully transcribed to aid coding and analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998).²

Ethnographic fieldnotes were taken in accordance with the approach outlined by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995). Coding and analysis of all fieldnotes followed (Strauss and Corbin 1998), and the emergent categories were then compared and contrasted to those from the interview data. For this particular study, instances of social meaning conflict between speakers were sought. There were over 30 references

to two types of social meaning conflict: a) communicative instances during which participants understood their own pronoun usage to have conflicted with other speakers' expectations, or b) communicative instances that participants experienced as negative due to other speakers' pronoun usage toward them. Four of these instances were chosen for the focus of the present study.

PRONOUN USE AND CONFLICTING SOCIAL MEANINGS

According to the formulations of Bayer (1979) and Delisle (1986), German speakers use the informal and formal pronouns *du* and *Sie* to express various social relationships. Research has revealed that *Sie* can express formality, authority, respect, and distance for some speakers, while *du* can express group membership, common interests, informality and intimacy. Exactly what a pronoun means in a certain context depends partially on either speaker's adherence to a certain pronominal system (A1 or A2). According to reported results from the larger data corpus³, native German speakers recognized the pronoun *Sie* to express some 39 social meanings, such as arrogance, deference (specifically to an older individual), dislike, formality/distance, unequal rank, and perceived age difference, among others. The participants also recognized the pronoun *du* to express anger, trust, intimacy/liking, equality, fellow participants in good times, directness/pushiness, perceived youth, perceived status, snobbery, and supportiveness, among others.

Although the formulations of both pronominal systems provided by Bayer (1979) and Delisle (1986) seem plausible, it becomes necessary to empirically confirm or disconfirm their statements from a communication approach. If two distinct systems of pronominal address do, indeed, exist, then are speakers communicatively aware of these systems? What specific communicative consequences result from such differences? If and when pronominal systems collide in communication, what can we learn about German speakers' understandings of appropriate and desirable relationships through this phenomenon?

These questions are ones that guide the following analysis. The goal of this study is to present the reader with four representative excerpts chosen from among the 62 interviews conducted with German native speakers that seem to reveal a collision of social meanings for the speaker through the situated use of the pronouns *du* or *Sie*. These particular excerpts were chosen among many to display what appears to be evidence for native speakers' uncertainty and/or dissatisfaction with

the social meanings they interpret other speakers to be expressing in their communicative acts. The ways in which native speakers talk about their language usage, i.e., their metapragmatic talk, when analyzed from a communication perspective, can provide a glimpse into German native speakers' communicative worlds and perhaps guide us toward some understanding of the kinds of interactional choices with which German native speakers are faced. In my analysis of these interview segments, I hope to accomplish the aforementioned goal with the help of participant-observations from the fieldwork I have conducted, from the six years I have lived and studied in Southern Germany, as well from the numerous extended visits I have made to Germany over the past 10 years.

The alienating force of the pronoun "Sie"

At the time of data collection, Anna Schmidt⁴ was a 31 year old homemaker and mother of two children living in a large city in Southern Germany. She previously worked as a speech therapist and then went back to the university in order to receive her master's degree. She had to postpone her studies with the birth of her first child and had not been able to return to the university in four years. She plans to return at some point to complete her master's degree. She is married to Jakob Schmidt (age 37), who is an employee in a patent office. Jakob plays the violin in an amateur orchestra, and in the following excerpt, Anna discusses a time when Jakob invited his fellow orchestra members to their home.

One situation, for example, that was really alienating to me was when Jakob invited his fellow orchestra members to our home. For them I'm naturally the wife of Mr. Schmidt, you know? At 31, mother of two children in a terraced house, the perfect cliché. And these stupid people come in and say, "Good evening, Mrs. Schmidt - good evening, Mrs. Schmidt," - I thought I would have to slap them, because they just shoved me in a direction that I didn't want to go. It was somehow distance - and I didn't like it very much. . . In this case I felt as though they viewed me as not worth as much because I'm a housewife and a mother and *not* a student like them. As a student you have the impression that the world lies before you - and I can do as I please. I'm free - my life is in front of me, you know? And I'm practically this person who stays at home - the whole day with the children, you know? Something like - "she can't have much in her head."

Anna's narration of this episode is embedded with terms that cast quite a negative evaluation on this encounter. Terms like "alienating,"

“cliché,” “stupid people,” “slap,” “shoved,” “distance,” etc. express a communicative event that was understood by the native speaker as one in which the other interlocutors’ interactional choices metaphorically push her into a pigeonhole in which she did not want to be placed.

If the borders for the A1 and A2 systems could be clearly distinguished, Anna, as a 31 year old homemaker and mother, would most likely be seen as an A1 member whose standard form of address would be *Sie*. She is no longer a member of the under-thirty crowd (although not far from it), and she describes herself as a non-member of the group “students,” a group to which the other orchestra members appear to belong. The *du* that the orchestra members share amongst themselves (Jakob included) could be described as an A2 system *du*, in that it signals a belonging to the same group (orchestra) and a sharing of common interests (playing music). When meeting Anna for the first time, the orchestra members do not recognize Anna as a member of either their orchestra, or as a student, and appropriately use the pronoun *Sie* (implied in the greeting with title and last name, i.e., Mrs. Schmidt) with her to express a basic respect toward a stranger and/or a signal of “nonsolidarity and social distance” (Delisle 1986: 4).

It seems evident that there is a collision of two differing pronominal systems of social meaning in this communicative event. Although the orchestra members acted appropriately according to the social rules of pronominal use, Anna clearly rejects the meaning embedded in the orchestra members’ use of *Sie*. She wishes to be viewed as an individual and not a “cliché,” as one of the group and not an outsider, as an intelligent being and not someone who “can’t have much in her head.”

Although there is no apparent breach of pronominal rule usage, it is evident that the native speaker is very much aware of the communicative enactment of two conflicting social meanings in this event. The consequence of this collision of systems is the native speaker’s strong dissatisfaction with the communicative event and her interpretation of being viewed as a non-equal by the other interlocutors. Anna’s need to be viewed and treated as a particular type of person was not met through the discursive choices of the orchestra members, and although there is no mention of specific communicative consequences in this case, it is evident that Anna still carries with her a negative evaluation of the interaction that occurred.

A common “du” without justification

When I interviewed Mary, age 54, she had been living in the Rhineland-Palatinate area of Germany for the past one and a half years. She moved

to this area from the former East Germany with her husband and had been working since she arrived as a speech therapist in two different kindergartens, as well as in her own private practice. In the following interview excerpt, Mary describes her impressions of the pronoun choices of her coworkers and the social meanings these choices hold for her.

I have actually experienced it here in Rhineland-Palatinate - I've lived here for 1½ years - I joined two teams, two kindergartens. These people are all younger than I am and they are all not so far in their education that I really want them to be addressing me with *du*. But it's tradition there that they use *du* with one another, and I start on my first day there and I'm told, 'I'm Ellen, we all say *du* to one another here - is that O.K. - you're Mary.' I was neither asked if this suits me, nor was I asked if I liked it - if I agreed with it. I got used to it. Even today, after one and a half years, I still don't agree with these people using *du* with me. It's odd, because I believe that, after one and a half years, I haven't established a real basis with these people that would justify this use of *du* . . . I do not feel connected and, oddly enough, I do not feel pleasantly touched when they address me with Mary. . . For me, this is something that somehow really gets at the core, and I am actually not ready to let these people get so close to me.

It is clear that in the kindergartens where Mary works, it is a tradition for coworkers to say *du* to one another. Although this is not the case in all work environments, interviewees have mentioned that it is often the case in jobs where it is important to develop a supporting atmosphere (e.g., social work, elementary school teachers). In this case, employees work with children, some having speech impediments, and the use of the common *du* may be one way to establish an atmosphere of working together for a common cause, i.e., to help the children.

Within this work environment, the employees have established an A2 system. *Du* is the standard form used to express commonality and solidarity. The employees have agreed on this system, and an attempt is made on Mary's first work day to implement her into the system. Mary describes this implementation process as one that did not allow free choice. She was "neither asked," but told, and she could do no more than to get "used to it."

There are several factors that inhibited Mary from agreeing with her coworkers' use of a common *du* and that point to her adherence to an A1 system. First, she mentions that her coworkers are all younger than she is, i.e., she does not share the commonality of age with them. According to the social rules of pronoun use (and the A1 system), as the older individual, it is Mary's right to offer the pronoun *du* and not her coworkers'. Second, Mary evaluates her coworkers' level of education

as lower than her own. Level of education is thus a second trait that Mary does not judge herself to share with her coworkers and that further distances her from the commonalities of the group.

Mary clearly states that she did not approve of her coworkers' use of *du* with her from the beginning; however, she attempted to adapt. It appears that she may have been able to accept the common *du* with her coworkers had she, in the one and a half years of employment, "established a real basis with these people that would justify this use of *du*." In spite of this lengthy period of time passing, she does not "feel connected" to her coworkers, nor does she feel "pleasantly touched" by their address forms with her. Further, she is still "not ready to let these people get so close" to her. Mary's expectations of connectedness and closeness for the pronoun *du* are those of an A1 user, to whom "*Sie* generally indicates a formal relationship and *du* an intimate one" (Delisle 1986: 4).

Once again, it seems that the social meanings for the pronouns *du* and *Sie* were not shared by the interlocutors participating in the described communication. Mary, functioning from an A1 perspective, in which the use of *du* is one that displays closeness and connectedness, rejects her coworkers' use of *du*, even though the coworkers' *du* seems to be based on perceptions of solidarity and commonality with Mary. By rejecting her coworkers' use of the informal pronoun, Mary defines what she understands *du*-relationships to be, i.e., close, connected, and established on a real basis.

The communicative consequences for Mary, as described in her interview, are such that she "cannot call them [her coworkers] by their first name" and she "actually avoid[s] addressing these people." For Mary, simply uttering the *du* pronoun with her coworkers goes against her very being and challenges her understanding of the type of relationship for which the *du* pronoun should be reserved. Hence, the communication Mary experiences at her place of employment is one that reflects her view of the work environment:

I would see a difference, if it were a 'working together,' where I say - we complement one another, we try together, together, to do something for the handicapped children - then I would agree to it. But this 'together' doesn't happen; it doesn't happen, and due to this I am not innerly prepared to use *du*.

It is difficult to determine whether Mary's refusal to share in the communicative choices of her coworkers has tainted her view of her work environment or vice versa. It is, however, clear that the collision of social meanings through pronoun choice can cause difficulty for

interlocutors to communicatively meet one another in their social relating, thus resulting in negative communicative outcomes.

The offense of using "Sie"

Esther, age 23, had grown up in a small village in the north of Rhineland-Palatinate and was attending the university in Landau, Germany at the time of our interview. In the following excerpt, Esther describes an incident in which she addresses a woman from her village with the pronoun *Sie*. She has seen the woman before but is not personally acquainted with her.

I only know that I once said *Sie* to a woman without thinking, because she is from my village but I only know her a little - and I said quite naturally, without giving it a second thought, "Are you (*Sie*) coming, too?" or something like that - and she was totally peeved - or agitated and upset that I used *Sie* with her. "I'm not that old - why are you saying *SIE* to me - this is really unbelievable - I've never experienced anything like this! From now on it's *du!*" - and on and on. She was really agitated, and then so was I, because for me it wasn't even a question - it was very, very normal [to use *Sie* with her].

It is unclear how old Esther and the woman were when this communication took place; however, it is evident that Esther is a member of the under-thirty crowd that Delisle (1986) refers to, allowing the possibility for Esther to adhere to an A2 system. An A2 member would address another individual whom they do not view as a friend or group member with the pronoun *Sie*. Esther expresses that she does not know the woman and that her choice of the *Sie* pronoun in this particular situation was "very, very normal" for her. With the choice of the *Sie* pronoun, Esther defines the woman as a non-friend and a non-member of any group to which Esther belongs.

After Esther addresses the woman with *Sie*, the woman immediately rejects Esther's communicative choice. This verbal confrontation, as Esther describes it, is itself evidence for the collision of differing social meanings. The woman is clearly upset with Esther's choice, asks Esther why she has chosen the *Sie* pronoun, and provides her own interpretation of what the *Sie* pronoun means to her, i.e., 'I am not old enough, or we are not that far apart in age, to justify your use of the *Sie* pronoun with me.'

The woman attempts to communicatively redefine the relationship between herself and Esther by requesting that Esther use *du* with her. Since Esther and she were not previously friends, this

request for Esther to use *du* is an attempt to define both speakers as part of the same group, most likely of the same age group. One can only speculate on the reason for the woman's move to redefine the relationship between Esther and herself. It appears, however, that Esther does not agree with the woman's redefinition, which is expressed through her own agitation.

Esther's choice to employ the pronoun *Sie* results in a verbal confrontation from her communicative partner, causing a communicative move that was "very normal" for Esther to be called into question. There was no match between each interlocutor's definition of the existing social relationships, and changes in the use of specific communicative resources were called upon to remedy the mismatch.

Bad manners and the use of "du"

The Palatinate area of Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany, including the area in and around Landau, is well-known for its wine. Each year from April through October, many wine festivals take place in the small villages of this area. People come from all over to enjoy the atmosphere of the festivals and, of course, the wine of this region.

Sabine, 41, lives in a small village in the area of Palatinate, Germany. She has earned a degree in domestic science and works in her family's winery. Each year, the family's winery participates in various wine festivals in the region, as well as organizing their own smaller gatherings. Sabine helps serve the drinks and food at these festivals and must deal with people of all ages when taking orders. In the following excerpt, Sabine describes her experiences at this type of wine festival.

. . . that example of the wine festival before - it is really the case that the people, they're, I don't know, 18-19 years old and they come up to you and say, 'Give me something to eat' or something like that. Or 'I would like' - not even 'I would like' but - I WANT, GIVE ME, DO THIS and things like that, you know? And that's a case where I think - this can't be good - all these bad manners - they rub me the wrong way, because. . .the customer comes along and would like to be served properly. For this I demand though that he acts properly toward me. And this distance is often gone. That's how it is with younger people - they come up to you and really blab at you, that I think to myself - how can he do that? I sometimes feel really, so really - I would like to say, can you please tell me why you just said *du* to me? I would naturally use *du* with him also - but just what they're thinking?

Many of the participants have reported on the effects of alcohol and the pronoun *du*. It is very often the case that the more alcohol that flows, whether it be at larger wine festivals or bars and pubs, the less guarded those who are drinking become. In such cases, less attention is paid to the social norms for pronoun use. Even if two individuals have just met, if the linking factor of alcohol has a strong enough effect, it is not unusual that the interlocutors will use the informal pronoun *du* with one another. I have personally been a witness of such behavior at various gatherings and have been addressed by complete strangers, albeit ones that have been drinking, with the pronoun *du*. The occurrence is usually forgotten by the next day, and the common *du* that was a link for one evening, in most cases, is discontinued in subsequent meetings between the individuals.

Sabine and her husband, Walter, have worked at many of these wine festivals and are used to the above-mentioned situations. They both report that they do not take offense to a *du* pronoun used with them, if it is due to the effects of alcohol. However, in the excerpt above, Sabine describes 18 to 19 year old "customers" who, when ordering, use the pronoun *du* with her, and Sabine evaluates this communicative behavior as bad mannered.

In this case, Sabine strictly defines the relationship between herself and these youths as "customer" and server. She expects this relationship to be based on "proper" behavior from both individuals involved. For Sabine, "proper" behavior does not include the use of *du* from her customers; in fact, receiving the *du* pronoun from her customers rubs her "the wrong way." She also expects that there be a certain amount of "distance" between herself and her customers. When the pronoun *du* is used, Sabine evaluates this communicative act as lacking such "distance."

Sabine also negatively evaluates the communication surrounding the use of *du* from "younger people," in that she describes the talk of her customers as "blabbing" at her (*labern*). The term for talk, "blab," implies that a person speaks without thinking. Throughout her description of this event, it is evident that she does not expect to be addressed with *du* while working at a wine festival, but rather with *Sie*. When this expectation is not met, she has even thought about challenging the offender on her or his behavior by also responding with the informal pronoun *du*.

It is unclear if the youths described in this excerpt are under the influence of alcohol when addressing Sabine with *du*, or if they are simply acting from the standpoint of an A2 address system. The fact

that Sabine has expressed to me that she *does* make exceptions for those individuals who are drunk and does not hold the use of a *du* against them seems to point to the possibility that the youths described in this scenario are *not* under the influence of alcohol. Rather, it appears that they are using the pronoun *du* with Sabine for some other reason.

If, in fact, the youths are acting from an A2 system, then there may be several factors at play in this scenario. Sabine specifically points to an age group, 18 to 19 year olds, who are at a point in their lives where they are either just finishing school or are still learning a vocation. It is not improbable that there is a certain amount of so-called “testing the waters” with what one can and cannot do in this age group, as some of my interviewees have reported. These youths may view the occupation of server as representing someone whom they can tell what to do and it will be done. This is reflected in Sabine’s description of the youths’ communication, in that they do not use request forms, e.g., “I would like,” but rather command forms, such as “give me” or “do this.” The use of *du* from an A2 system member would also be consistent with the following line of thought: ‘We are all at this wine festival together, enjoying ourselves and participating in a good atmosphere, and through this connection we are all per *du* for today.’ When combining both of these possibilities, it allows the youth to both test what she or he can get away with while having the safety net of a good atmosphere to fall back on. The possibility of being challenged by someone like Sabine for such communicative behavior becomes less of a threat due to the festive surroundings, which could always be used as an acceptable reason for the choice of the pronoun *du*.

Sabine is thus confronted with a situation in which she has very little choice but to accept a pronoun from younger individuals that she finds inappropriate. As an A1 user, with *Sie* as the standard form she would normally expect from her customers, Sabine is clearly dissatisfied with this predicament. It is but another example of the power of social meaning enacted through pronoun use and what can occur when there is a misalignment of expectations and communicative behavior.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this study is to provide a glimpse into the communicative worlds of German native speakers by examining specific excerpts of

talk from interviewees about their pronominal use in various situations. I have provided the reader with an overview of the work of Bayer (1979) and Delisle (1986), who explicated two coexisting pronominal systems in the German language, in order to provide a framework for the analysis of the interview excerpts. With this framework, participant-observations, and supplement interview materials, I have provided a reading of four communicative situations in which the social meanings of the interlocutors involved appear to be misaligned, thus resulting in expressed negative evaluations of the interactions and, in some cases, negative communicative outcomes.

It seems evident that interlocutors are very much aware of their own and others' communicative choices while they are being enacted in conversation; however, the social meanings that interlocutors understand themselves and others to be expressing in and through these choices do not always match. In each of the scenarios discussed, it appears that the interlocutors involved are operating from very different pronominal meaning systems. When members of each system meet in communication, it often results in uncertainty and/or dissatisfaction with the communicative process. Various communicative outcomes thus result from these collisions of social meaning as interlocutors attempt to define and redefine their social relationships through their communicative choices.

By focusing on moments of communicative heterogeneity rather than communicative homogeneity, much can be learned about the underlying systems of meaning upon which our ways of interacting within a culture are based. By examining interlocutors' differing social meanings, and attempting to uncover how they are different, we may also gain insight into native speakers' various beliefs and value systems, which are complex components of culture, and the effects that these have on our daily interactions.

There were some limitations to the present study that should be noted. Although the data was collected in periods that spanned over a decade, it is unclear if and how the social meanings expressed by the participants have changed over time. This study does not claim to have tracked long-term meaning changes that the use of *du* and *Sie* may have undergone. Because the data collection happened mostly in the Rheinland-Palatinate and Bavarian areas of Germany, regional social meanings of the informal and formal pronouns may be at work, thus prohibiting the research results from being generalized to the larger population as a whole.

Belz and Kinginger (2003), in their study on the difficulties German language learners face when confronted with the informal and formal pronouns, argue that “address form use in German is inherently ambiguous, presenting the learner with a complex system of meaning potential rather than a closed set of homogeneous rules” (p. 593). Thus, the present analysis of native speakers’ metapragmatic talk about their communicative choices is a rich resource in at least two ways. First, it provides cultural communication scholars a better understanding of interlocutors’ “means of speech in human communities, and their meanings to those who use them” (Hymes 1972: 2). Second, it provides a rich resource to German language teachers and students faced with unraveling the intricacies of a foreign pronominal system. Moving away from a rule-based model of learning, the present study provides instances of social meaning that are attached to German speakers’ pronominal usage, thus shedding some light on the “inherently ambiguous” system as a whole.

The pronouns *du* and *Sie* carry important meanings for German speakers and are one way to better understand what types of relationships are appropriate and/or desirable for Germans in contemporary German society. Once we have established what these types of relationships are for German speakers, there are several strands of inquiry that may follow. First, are the resources used by German interlocutors to communicatively negotiate social relationships similar in social meaning to those in other societies, and if not, what do these differences say about particular cultural values and beliefs held by the interlocutors? Second, are appropriate and/or desirable relationships within German culture(s) also appropriate and/or desirable relationships in other cultures? These questions are ones that can and should be engaged in future research endeavors, for the answers could carry important implications for our understanding and teaching of cultural and intercultural communication. In the meantime, the present study has provided one step toward better understanding the intricate relationship between culture and communicative behavior in general, and more specifically, the link between personal pronoun use and the complex meaning systems that are at work in German interactions.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) for the opportunity to conduct dissertation research under a DAAD Annual Grant for ten months in Landau, Germany.
2. I have translated all interview segments included in this paper from the original German. I have a certificate in German translation from Rutgers University and have worked both in the United States and Germany as a translator from German to English.
3. The study I refer to was presented at the 1995 annual convention of the Speech Communication Association under the title, “‘Kann ich Sie duzen, oder soll ich dich siezen?’: Uses, social meanings, and functions of the German pronouns *du* and *Sie*.”
4. All names in this paper are pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves. This was done in order to protect the anonymity of all interviewees.

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APPENDIX

Below are the original German transcripts of each translated interview excerpt included in this paper.

Transcript 1: Anna, 31, mother and housewife, previously worked as a speech therapist

. . . eine Situation z.B. war für mich total befremdlich, wie Jakob seine Orchestermitglieder eingeladen hat zu uns ins Haus, ja? Und für die bin ich natürlich die Frau von Herrn Schmidt, ja? Mit 31 - Mutter von zwei Kindern im Reihennittelhaus - also, perektes Klischee. Und diese blöden Leute kommen 'rein und sagen, "Grüß Gott, Frau Schmidt - Grüß Gott, Frau Schmidt" - ich hab' gedacht, ich muß sie watschen, ja? Weil die mich einfach dahingeschoben haben in eine Richtung wo ich eigentlich gar nicht sein wollte. Und das war irgendwie Distanz - hat mir also nicht so gut gefallen. . . Ich hab's in dem Fall empfunden, dass sie mich als minderwertig betrachten, weil ich Hausfrau und Mutter bin sozusagen und eben NICHT Student wie sie, und als Student hat man so den Eindruck, die Welt liegt vor mir - ich kann tun und lassen was ich will. Ich bin frei - ich hab' mein Leben vor mir, ja? Und ich bin praktisch jemand der ist zu Hause, ja? - den ganzen Tag mit Kindern, ja? Also, sie kann nicht viel im Kopf haben so ungefähr, ja?

Transcript 2: Mary, 54, speech therapist

Ich hab' es eigentlich jetzt hier in der Pfalz - seit 1 1/2 Jahren lebe ich hier - komme in zwei Teams hinein, in zwei Kindergärten komme ich hinein.

Diese Leute sind alle jünger als ich und sie sind auch von der Ausbildung her nicht so, daß ich mich unbedingt gerne duzen werde wollen. Aber das ist dort Tradition, daß die Leute sich untereinander duzen, und ich beginne den ersten Tag dort und es wird mir gesagt - ich bin die Ellen, wir duzen uns hier alle - bist du einverstanden - du bist die Mary. Also, ich bin weder gefragt worden, ob mir das paßt und bin weder gefragt worden, ob das mir gefällt, ob ich einverstanden bin. Ich habe mich dem angepasst. Ich bin auch heute noch, nach anderthalb Jahren, innerlich nicht einverstanden, daß diese Leute mich duzen. Komischerweise, weil ich der Meinung bin, ich habe mit diesen Leuten, mit denen ich zusammen arbeite - anderthalb Jahre - keine richtige Basis gefunden, daß dieses Du im Grunde genommen gerechtfertigt ist. . . Ich fühle mich nicht verbunden und fühle mich auch eigenartige Weise nicht angenehm berührt, wenn sie mich mit Mary ansprechen. . .Für mich ist das also eine, eine Sache, die schon irgendwo an die Substanz geht, und ich bin eigentlich nicht bereit, die Leute so nahe an mich herankommen zu lassen.

Transcript 3: Mary, 54, speech therapist

Und da würde ich schon einen Unterschied sehen, wenn es ein Zusammenarbeiten wäre, wo ich sage - wir ergänzen uns gegenseitig, wir versuchen gemeinsam, GEMEINSAM, etwas für die behinderten Kinder zu machen, da wäre ich einverstanden. Aber dieses Gemeinsam läuft nicht - es läuft nicht, und insofern bin ich auch innerlich eigentlich, eigentlich nicht bereit, mich zu duzen.

Transcript 4: Esther, 23, university student

Ich weiß nur einmal, daß ich ganz selbstverständlich Sie zu einer Person gesagt hab', weil die war bei uns aus dem Ort aber ich kenn' sie nur vom Weiterem - und ich hab' ganz selbstverständlich, ohne zu überlegen, gesagt "Kommen Sie auch mit?" oder irgendwas - und die war TOTAL pikiert - oder total irritiert und verärgert, daß ich sie gesiezt hab'. "So alt bin ich nun auch 'mal wieder nicht - wieso sagst du SIE zu mir, also das ist wohl GANZ unmöglich - das habe ich NOCH NIE erlebt! Ab heut' sofort Du!" und so weiter - also die war ganz irritiert - ich war dann auch irritiert, weil das war für mich gar kein Fragefall, das war für mich ganz, ganz normal.

Transcript 5: Sabine, 41, earned degree in domestic science, works in family winery

. . . vorhin das Beispiel Weinfest - es ist wirklich so, daß die Leute - die sind, was weiß ich, 18, 19 Jahre alt, und die kommen dahin und sagen 'Gib' mir 'mal 'was zu essen,' oder so, ne? Oder ich möcht' - nicht mal ich

möcht' - ich WILL, GIB MIR MAL, MACH 'MAL und so, ne? Und das ist eigentlich wo ich denk' - also es kann eigentlich nicht gut sein - diese ganze Umgangsformen - die widerstrebt mir, weil. . ja, eigentlich der Kunde kommt und möchte 'was und möchte ordentlich bedient werden. Dafür verlange ich auch, daß er sich ordentlich mir gegenüber verhält. Und diese Distanz, die ist oft weg. Das ist dann so gerade bei jüngeren Leuten, die kommen da einfach, und labern einen so richtig an, daß ich denk' - wie kommt er eigentlich dazu? Ich fühle mich dann richtig manchmal so richtig - würde ich gerne sage' - sag' mal, kannst du mir mal sagen, warum du jetzt Du zu mir sagst - ich würde den natürlich auch duzen - was sie sich denken dabei?

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