

# HOW TO EXPLAIN DIACHRONIC VARIATION OF POLITENESS

## The example of German pronouns of address<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – This contribution looks at diachronic developments in the forms and uses of German address pronouns and treats them as one example of politeness change. The discussion shows that the historical analysis of the pronouns is very precise in the description of their developments, but fails to explain how and why address forms change. In order to facilitate an explanatory approach, the concept of politeness needs to be addressed too. The article proposes a contemporary concept of politeness as relational work that can contribute to accounting for these diachronic processes, and that can also be used to explain politeness change as an example of an invisible-hand process.

**Keywords:** politeness; address terms; language change; historical grammar.

## 1. Introduction

If we reflect on and speak about politeness, we – in a more or less implicit way – always refer to something that has been said, done or conceived in the past. At a first glance, at least four levels of the historic dimension of politeness can be identified, which are closely connected with each other:

- a. Evaluative level: every time we classify a type of behaviour as polite (or impolite), we compare it to presumptive norms (etiquette), but also to behaviour observed in the past. Only if it shows relevant similarities with acts performed in analogous situations in the past can we say whether it is polite or not.
- b. Discursive level: It can easily be observed that politeness is an important issue of everyday reflections on language usage and that it is frequently treated in mass media and popular books. A great deal of this kind of reasoning and discussion about politeness, and the criteria applied by speakers and hearers for the evaluation of interactive acts in terms of politeness or impoliteness, deals with its historical development. The discussion concentrates, for example, on a presumed decline of politeness, about the younger generation being less polite than the older generation being less polite than the older generation; usually it refers to old-fashioned handbooks of good manners which always refer to even older, even more old-fashioned handbooks of good manners.

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- c. Terminological level: many of the metalinguistic terms used to speak about politeness are themselves highly loaded with historicity, as Ehlich pointed out: “There are few social phenomena of significance that have the mark of their own historicity so indelibly etched into the terms used to refer to them as – in various languages – politeness.” (Ehlich 1992, p. 71). Especially terms like *cortesia*, *courtesy*, *courtoisie* or *Höflichkeit* link their object to the very particular social organisation of courts between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment period.
- d. Conceptual level: the concept of politeness (understood as a theoretical construct, hence in the sense of politeness<sup>2</sup>),<sup>2</sup> itself develops as a result of specific questions addressed and theoretic models accepted as valid in a given period. The concept of politeness is “constructed historically” (Ehlich 1992, p. 73).

These levels are all interrelated, which makes it difficult to be clear about what we are referring to when we talk about politeness. Indeed, the term *politeness* refers to a very heterogeneous group of behaviour patterns (greeting rituals, table manners, speech act realizations, dresscodes etc), which do not have very much in common aside from the fact that they are classified as potentially polite. But what does it mean, for example, when someone says that younger people are not as polite as the previous generation: Do they just use other terms, do they have another idea/another concept of politeness or do they just behave in a new and different way in particular situations? The difficulty in defining politeness becomes even greater if it is approached as a scientific concept, and if the diachronic dimension is taken into consideration, since everything changes over time.

It is rather easy to realize that behaviour patterns have changed from the Middle Ages to the present day. The terms used to refer to those behavioural patterns have changed as well. And the concept of politeness has changed in many ways. To mention only one example: nowadays a concept such as “sprezzatura” (Paternoster 2015, p. 87ff. or Lindorfer 2009, p. 35ff.) does not form part of the general concept of politeness any more.

As a result, it may be very difficult to compare politeness phenomena diachronically. Can we easily apply a modern concept to manners in Italian Renaissance courts? Don’t we speak about completely different forms of behavior, labelled in a different way (other terms) and based on a different concept? Can we compare forms of behaviour manifested in completely different surroundings, social settings and value systems to each other and classify them all in the same way – as polite or not polite? An appropriate *tertium comparationis* in historical politeness research would be required (Kádár, Haugh 2013, p. 159ff.)? It would be more than helpful to have at our disposal a clear (universal) concept of politeness to be able to approach diachronic developments. On the other hand, a clear contemporary concept of politeness depends upon reflections on the historicity of the phenomenon: “[...] the recognition of its historicity is an almost inalienable condition for understanding it.” (Ehlich 1992, p. 106)

The triangulation between the diachronic approach, *tertium comparationis* and the constitution of the object of research seems still to be unresolved. Whereas other fields of historical pragmatics are well grounded in theory and empirical research, this is not the case for diachronic approaches to politeness: “[...] we do not have anything even remotely similar in detail and extensiveness on how politeness and impoliteness developed across

<sup>2</sup> In the scientific literature on politeness the term “politeness1 (or first-order-politeness) is used to refer to folk-theoretic concepts used in everyday exchanges and “politeness2” (or second-order-politeness) to scientific concepts (Kádár / Haugh 2013, p. 3).

time and of how one stage leads to the next.” (Jucker, Kopaczyk 2017, p. 433). The lack of explanatory approaches to the diachronic variation of politeness marks a notable knowledge gap for politeness theory as well as for historical linguistics and the theory of language change. Much discussion is needed in order to construct a solid ground for reflection.

This text aims at making a small contribution to this theoretical discussion, hence at formulating the first draft of an answer to the question: which kind of change do we exactly refer to when we speak about changes in or of politeness and what are the mechanisms of this kind of development? In other words: how and why do things change? The discussion will focus on German address terms, in particular pronouns, as appropriate examples for the relation between the concept of politeness, the use of so-called linguistic politeness forms (like the address form *Sie*) and diachronic change.

The theoretical framework applied in this article is referred to throughout the text where needed. Briefly, the conceptual and theoretical tools applied in the following pages are of three different types. First of all, to explain diachronic variation in politeness, the role and nature of politeness in communication in general has to be considered, because it might be a potential *tertium comparationis*. Therefore, politeness will be framed as part of a broader theory of communication. The general theory presented here grounds on a Gricean (Grice 1975) account of communication (the Cooperative Principle and its maxims as instruments for the explanation of language use)<sup>3</sup> and its extension and application to politeness. The second tool is the concept of politeness that results from this kind of approach. Politeness will appear as realization of the politeness maxim, which was mentioned, but not really discussed by Grice. In particular, politeness is considered to be the central element of relational work in the sense of recent theories (Kádár, Haugh 2013, p. 50). Politeness, therefore, will be presented as relation-oriented communicative behaviour driven by the politeness maxim which can be detailed in submaxims in the sense of Leech (2014, p. 91). The description of behaviour according to maxims is one relevant form of input for explanations of language change as an invisible-hand-process introduced by Keller (1994). This model will be the third element of the theory-kit used in the following considerations. It is aimed at explaining language change as unintended consequence of communicative (and therefore intentional) behaviour; the model will be briefly introduced and will then be applied to diachronic variation of politeness which – in analogy with language change - could be called politeness change.

In the following sections, an overview is given of the most important developments in the field of address terms (section 2); then an outline is offered on the development of politeness (section 3) is offered, and thirdly, tentative explanations are offered of change processes regarding politeness are offered (section 4). The leading questions of the three parts will be: 1. What changed in the use of address forms in German? 2. How is the use of address forms connected with politeness and what concept of politeness do we presuppose when we explain change in a certain way? 3. Why did the use of address forms change?

The research question is mainly theoretic. No empirical work will be presented. The data discussed in the text are descriptions of German address forms published in

<sup>3</sup> This kind of approach tries to explain the possibility of understanding communication at least partially by describing what participants expect each other to do or not to do in a given situation. Those expectations are formulated as the Cooperative Principle (We expect each other to contribute in a constructive way to the success of a conversation) and maxims (We expect each other to tell the truth, to say as much as we know, etc.).

selected grammars – in particular grammars which are not intended only as normative texts but present also a description of the use of language.

## 2. Address pronouns in German

The system of German address terms and, in particular, address pronouns, is well documented and discussed in the scientific literature (Kohz 1982, Besch 1996, Simon 2003). Some rules or tendencies for the choice of an appropriate address form are mentioned in grammar books as well. Modern German presents a system of address pronouns with two options – the classic T/V-distinction discussed by Brown and Gilman (1960). As in other European languages, this system has changed considerably over time. Originally, in very early German, there was just one pronoun of address and then other options were added. The evolution is the result of changing customs and attitudes regarding formality, distance and deference, as pointed out by Jucker and Kopaczyk (2017, p. 483), who sum up the situation like this: “Terms of address, therefore, provide a fertile ground for studying issues of politeness and impoliteness.” Address terms are also a permanent object for metalinguistic reflections on politeness and language change. Not only modern grammar books, but also historical grammars give some insights into the forms and the use of those pronouns (and other address forms) in different historical periods; therefore, they provide useful material for research into historical politeness.

Here I present a brief survey of the evolution of German address pronouns (based on Kohz 1982, p. 4ff, Valtl 1986, p. 168ff, Ammon 1972, p. 82ff., von Polenz 1999, p. 383ff., Simon 2003). In very early medieval German, pronouns were not used regularly; the conjugation of the personal forms of verbs was predominantly synthetic. If pronouns were used, there was just one address pronoun, which was *du* – the pronoun still used until today as the T-form. From the 9th century, the analytical forms of verbs became more important. From then on, another form could be found: documents show that speakers used the second person plural *ir* to address single persons. This form was used in particular to address persons in a higher hierarchical position; it was probably influenced by Romance languages, in particular by the *pluralis maiestatis* used first by Popes and later also by Emperors for self-reference in the first person. In a later period, the second-person form was used to refer to the addressee if he or she deserved special consideration. With the *du-ir* distinction, the German pronoun system for the first time offered the possibility to vary the address form with respect to the social role of the speakers and the rank of the receiver.

Obviously, it is impossible to find data recording the real use of address pronouns in ancient German society, but other sources of data are accessible, such as literature. Grimm (1822, p. 362), for instance, bases his consideration upon medieval literature where we can see, for example, that married persons use the plural form to speak to each other. The same form is used to refer to clerics, unknown persons or women. The singular form (*du*) is used between friends or in general between persons belonging to the lower social classes. In summary, the first tendency in the evolution of the use of address pronouns seems to be a distinction based on social ranking, leading to the choice of a plural form with people of high status. A general maxim followed by speakers performing this kind of linguistic behaviour could thus be expressed like this: “If you want to express the belief that the other person is worthy of special consideration, treat her or him as if she or he was more than one person (more than you)”.

With the growing differentiation and stratification of society, the need for linguistic distinction of social roles appears to increase. In the 15th and 16th centuries, there seems to be an inflated use of *ir*, and consequently this form is no longer suitable to communicate the recognition of a great hierarchical distance between speaker and addressee. A new, more deferential form was needed. From now on, very highly ranked persons were addressed by using third person forms like “Her majesty”. This strategy was subsequently introduced into the address pronoun system, which was integrated with the third-person singular pronoun (*Er/sie*) as a way to express deference. At this point, the system consists of three forms: *du – ir – Er/sie*. Pluralization is overtaken by another tendency, which can be described as objectivation or the tendency to treat the other person as she or he were the object of discourse. High class persons could not be addressed directly like any other person, speakers had to show a great distance between themselves and the interlocutor, who is presented as if he or she were the object of discourse. Another corresponding maxim could be stated then: “If you want to express the belief that the other person is worth of special consideration, treat her or him as if she or he was an object of discourse.”

The pronoun system further changed: things became more complex with the increasing social importance of the middle classes and with the refinement of aristocratic manners as described e.g. in Elias (2000). Common people partially adopted aristocratic manners and linguistic forms. In this situation, an additional distinction was made. The third-person singular pronoun was set into the plural and used as the highest address form in the system. The *Sie*-form, which is still used as the V-pronoun in German, became widespread. The objectivated form was developed in the plural – a pluralization of the objectivation. For a short period, this was even topped by another expression: “Diesselben”. Coincident with the government of Frederick the Great (Prussian King between 1740 and 1786), and the period of enlightened absolutism in Germany, this form was added – again “at the top” of the address forms. The Middle classes did not follow this new development and the form went out of fashion very quickly. At the highest level of expansion of the address form system, there were five German address pronouns, which I list in order of increasing deference: *du – ihr – er/sie – Sie – Diesselben* (Adelung 1782 vol. 2, p. 684). Around the year 1800, a reverse development began. Grimm (1822, p. 370) notes that *ihr* and *er/sie* switched positions. Then the system was reduced gradually until it arrived at the two-position distinction which is still in use. The development is summarized in Figure 1.

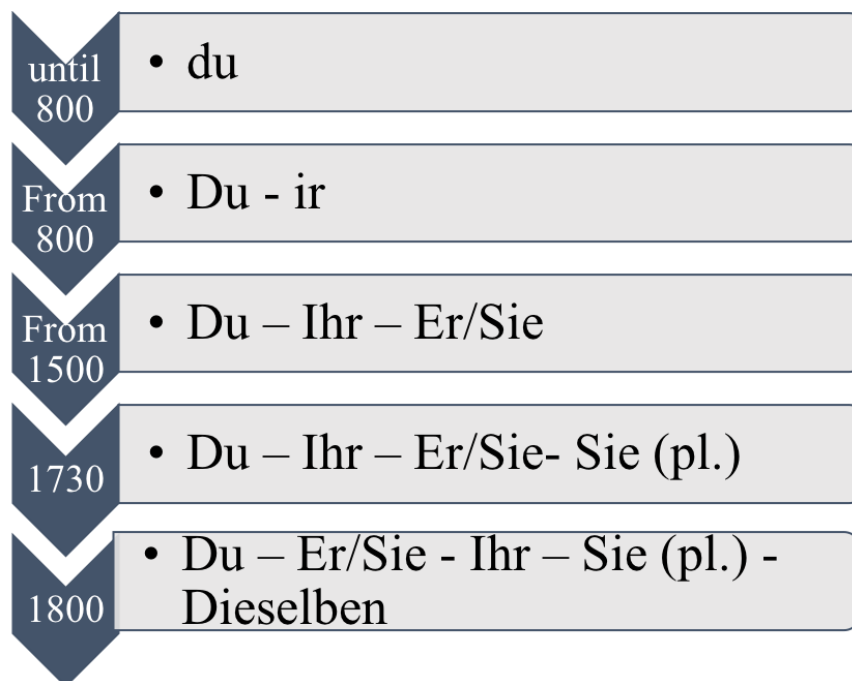


Figure 1  
The diachronic variation of German address pronouns.

In the 20th century, which is of course better documented, one can notice that also within a T-V-system with only two address pronouns there can be important shifts. German for some years tended to take the same direction as the Scandinavian languages where the V-pronoun is still present in the system, but rarely used. During the 1960s, student movements and other progressive groups aimed at a society based on solidarity in which social differences were no longer expressed in almost every speech event. In some communities of practice like the Social Democratic Party or the Green Party, the V-form (*Sie*) would be nearly offensive if used between persons belonging to the same group. However, in many other social environments the distinction between *du* and *Sie* was and is still expected (Kretzenbacher 2010). In fact, there is a lot of debate about the “correct” use of those forms, which are marked by rituals for the transition from the formal *Sie* to the informal *du*.

The linguistic developments of the system of address pronouns, as discussed in the literature, appear to follow the reorganization of society. That is, the differentiation or the (apparent) simplification of the pronoun system just mirrors the differentiation or stratification of society, or the growing impact of democratic processes and attitudes on interpersonal relationships. Whether such changes should be considered changes in language use, in the conceptualization of politeness or in the structure and functioning of society – which is then reflected in some adjustment of linguistic features like address pronouns – depends on what we mean when we speak about politeness. This will be addressed later.

### 3. Address pronouns and politeness

What we have seen so far is a correlation between morphological shifts on the one hand and social change on the other. The discussion has only concerned itself with the

collective level of the organization of language. If we want to explain how and why linguistic change occurred and how it relates to culture and society, it will be useful to combine the considerations on the collective level with a closer look at the level of the individual, asking what speakers do when they use address terms, how this is connected to politeness and which politeness concepts are useful to describe co-occurring social phenomena like the use of an address pronoun and the social distance between speaker and listener, but also to explain the link between these features.

From the very beginning of linguistic reflection on diachronic aspects of politeness, e.g. in the grammar books by Adelung (1782) and Grimm (1822), the linguistic regularities observed have been put into relation with politeness by the authors. Obviously, grammar books will not provide reliable data about how persons used to speak, but they do give some insights into the way early linguists understood politeness and commented on historical changes in interactional behaviour. In the chapter about nouns and pronouns in his grammar, Grimm (1822, p. 355ff.) mentions *politeness* regularly. In his opinion, there is only one natural way of addressing other persons linguistically: the second-person singular. All the other forms are treated by Grimm as polite plural forms, which are evaluated very negatively by the author; he considers them “mere sins against sense and taste” (1822, p. 368).<sup>4</sup> In his opinion, they do not fit into the system of German. The reason why they have been adopted by German, according to Grimm, is the influence of other European languages and the need to behave in a courteous way, hence the imitation of French and Italian courtiers by the German aristocracy and, subsequently, the alignment of other social classes to those forms of behaviour.

Adelung and Grimm published their books in a period when pragmatic approaches to the study of language were far from being conceivable; the authors were concerned with the language system and not with its use in communication. They could not integrate reflections on politeness in their view on language. Politeness was still conceived as an ensemble of behaviour patterns that are independent from language; they have an influence on language and the pronoun system, but cannot be imagined as systematically related to it. To talk to another person using an address form, according to this point of view, simply means to let this person know that he or she is being addressed; for this purpose, it will be enough to use some deictic expression like the pronoun *du* – any further differentiation, e.g. the distinction between persons located higher or lower in the social hierarchy is – from this point of view - worse than superfluous as a part of what is said: it makes no sense and is a kind of annoyance, and may even cause misunderstandings. For early linguists, sentences were sentences and not utterances, which do not include and should not include messages concerning the relationship between speakers or other information that goes beyond grammar, reference and lexical meaning. The modern idea that any utterance conveys some message on different levels (speaker’s self, relation to the addressee, persuasion, information) was not yet salient to them.

Politeness, from this traditional point of view, is not a linguistic term. It is an umbrella term that includes terms like *familiarity* (*Vertraulichkeit*), *pride* (*Stolz*), *humility* (*Demut*), *servility* (*Unterwürfigkeit*), *customs* (*Sitte*), *honour* (*Ehre*), which are mentioned by Grimm as some reasons for what he calls polite behaviour. In any case, politeness – even though it is not (yet) conceived as a part of any communication event – appears to be a dynamic component in the development of society and in a mediated way also of languages: It is a strategy in relationship management that can be observed in the history

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from Grimm’s grammar book have been translated by me (C.E.).

of German address pronouns from the time the “original sin” of pluralizing single addressees was committed. That is, the pronoun system, according to Grimm and Adelung, changes because speakers wish to be polite. This gives rise to a kind of outdoing game, leading to new forms: when a highly respectful form spreads into a wider area of society, it no longer does its communicative job. Therefore, very respectful persons would have to introduce a new, “higher” form.

The results of this process are the forms outlined in the first part of this contribution. The “lower” – but not the lowest – forms in the system are labelled by Grimm as “mere politeness signs” (1822, p. 366) – and therefore useless for the transmission of information, which is the “real” purpose of any communicative exchange. Grimm points out that expressions of this type “were reduced” to this status and suggests that expressions conveying referential information have a much higher value. Politeness is identified with the formal execution of linguistic patterns that express the appropriate attitude for the given situation and personal configuration (situation, setting of the exchange, number of participants, relation between them etc.).

According to Linke (1996, p. 73) it is quite common during the 18th and 19th centuries for the concept of politeness to oscillate between form and intention. Grimm anticipates the pre-pragmatic idea, still widely accepted in discussions among laypersons, that politeness basically means the use of “politeness forms”. This is a static concept of politeness as it does not take into account features of the situation and context and it cannot explain language change relating it to polite communication. Grimm clearly refuses politeness if it consists only in the schematic realization of pre-established behaviour patterns. He implicitly seems to allude to the existence some kind of real, honest politeness probably similar to what would be formulated extensively in the Enlightenment period.

This type of negative evaluation of politeness has important theoretical implications. I would call it the etymological fallacy. The argument presented by Grimm is an argument typical of the (particularly German) middle-class attitudes towards politeness; it is shared by many other researchers even today and can be summarized like this: “Politeness derives (etymologically and conceptually) from courteous, aristocratic behaviour (Weinrich 1986). We (middle-classes) want to take our distance from aristocracy; we do not want to be ceremonious and ritualistic like them. We consider their manners, in particular politeness, false and formal. We prefer a direct, open and honest way of communication.” The result of this argument is a view of politeness that presents it as an optional component of communication, a kind of message added to the “real content” of an utterance, which could easily be omitted. Obviously, in this kind of approach politeness appears to be just an echo of courteous communication and not a feature or an aspect of any communicational act.

There is a second point in Grimm’s considerations that is theoretically interesting and still detectable in modern approaches: the coincidence of politeness with the use of particular linguistic forms, so-called politeness forms, here politeness pronouns. Some of the most important contemporary German grammar books like Duden 2009, Eisenberg 2006, Hentschel, Weydt 2003, Helbig, Buscha 1991 still label the V-pronoun *Sie* as the “politeness form” and thus suggest that politeness can be achieved and, indeed, is achieved as a result of the use of these forms.

To sum up: Grimm, Adelung and other early German grammarians established a linguistic tradition, which sees a close relationship between address forms and politeness. To them, being polite means using the correct (more polite) form of the pronouns (and other expressions) available. This is analysed as an echoing of aristocratic ways of



speaking in the language of the non-aristocratic people. The concept of politeness that results from this approach is rather static: they consider the language system and culture/society two independent entities where language reflects what happens in society and changes when the relationships between different classes get rearranged. This kind of approach clearly fails to explain politeness change as one facet of language change. It does not take into account the fact that many language structures do not change when society changes and others change independently from social change. An explanatory approach to language (and politeness) change would have to be much clearer about the interdependence between language, communication and society.

Two characteristics of the 18th century concept of politeness (in Germany, but in other European countries as well) will be important for the following discussion: the idea that politeness has always been there as an impulse for language change, that it is permanently present in interaction; and the treatment of politeness as an umbrella term, under which we can subsume many other concepts.

Some of the features of early linguistic concepts of politeness have survived until today. Many others have been revisited or totally changed. Pragmatic approaches (Eelen 2001, Watts 2003, Kádár, Haugh 2013, Leech 2014) take into account the situation of communication and the context of utterances to compute the degree of politeness observers ascribe to an utterance. Politeness is no longer seen as a function of the use of certain forms or expressions, but as the result of a complex process of interpretation. The aforementioned changes are now accounted for in terms like "medieval discernment politeness", "solidarity-oriented, positively polite" (Bax, Kádár 2011, p. 10ff.), a shift from respect and deference to familiarity/endearment (Leech 2014, p. 290) or a tendency in the direction of "camaraderie" (Lakoff 2005). Individual behaviour is linked to the collective level of the language system, but still, there is no general theory of politeness change: terms like those mentioned before concern single aspects of politeness, some concepts that must be brought together under the umbrella term "politeness", but not the complex concept of politeness in its entirety. In fact, it is not clear how the relation between discernment, solidarity and other terms on the one hand, and politeness on the other can be conceived. An explanatory approach to politeness change will have to deal with this.

#### 4. Some elements for an explanatory approach to politeness change

In this section I will outline some of the requirements to be met to explain how and why the use of address forms and linguistic politeness in general change. The goal is to treat politeness change as a particular case of language change and not only as interference that a system presumed to be independent, such as society, might exercise on language and, in particular, on politeness forms. To this end, it is necessary to present a concept of politeness that can account for shifts in the structure of the pronoun system. The argument in a nutshell goes like this:

1. Language is first of all a means of communication.
2. When we communicate, we do not simply exchange information or facts, we also do other things.

3. In order to do these other things we sometimes try to be original, nice, pleasant, funny, creative etc., through our language usage.
4. By doing so we create new linguistic forms, new expressions, new words etc. or use existing forms in a new way.
5. Some of those new forms will be judged useful by other speakers and therefore repeated.
6. Some of those creative forms will become conventional.

This kind of explanation is clearly inspired by the invisible-hand theory of language change (Keller 1994). This last section will try to unpack this argument and apply it to the history of address pronouns in European languages.

In the discussion above I have already argued that it is empirically incorrect to identify politeness with the use of certain ways of addressing. It can even be impolite to address some other person with *Sie, Lei, Usted* etc., – e.g. when this partner is a friend, a co-member of a socialist party or a colleague in certain working environments. On the other hand, it is evident that one can be very impolite even though one uses the expected form. The use of a particular address pronoun is neither necessary nor sufficient in order to be perceived as polite. Politeness is a quality of utterances which cannot be explained exclusively with the presence or absence of some linguistic forms. An analysis of address pronouns only in terms of politeness bypasses their basic communicative functions and overloads them with meaning. Basically, any address pronoun has three functions that – in terms derived from Gricean pragmatics and discussed in Keller (2018, p. 291) – can be identified as representative, persuasive and relational. In short, the use of an address pronoun informs an addressee or a group of addressees that the speaker is talking to them (representative function), it invites them to accept the role of listener for a while (persuasive function) and it communicates something about the speaker’s idea concerning the relationship between himself and the addressee (relational function); it expresses something like: “I use the this pronoun because in my evaluation we are friends, strangers, I am superior to you, I feel close to you etc.” Finally, the speaker planning his utterance will calculate the attitude of the hearer and choose the pronoun that presumably will be acceptable for him. Including this presumption of reciprocity, the use of a pronoun conveys meaning at four levels, and can be said to encode these messages:

1. I am addressing you.
2. Please listen to me.
3. I think we are friends, strangers, in a hierarchical relation etc.
4. I think that you think that we are friends etc.

If the addressee agrees more or less with this evaluation, she or he will perceive the use as polite in the sense of ‘appropriate’ in the given situation, obviously also taking into account other features of the situation and the context. If she/he does not agree, she/he may feel offended and will interpret the speaker as being impolite.

According to this interpretation, politeness is only loosely connected with the use of address forms; the connection is mediated by the relational aspect of communication. For a better understanding of the pronoun system and its diachronic dynamics it becomes necessary to discuss in some more detail the relevance, role and dynamics of relational communication within a general framework of the nature of communication. This

approach is in line with what has been called the “relational shift in politeness research” (Kádár, Haugh 2013, p. 50), which replaces or at least integrates the classic, face-orientated point of view introduced mainly by Brown and Levinson (1987). Many scholars involved in politeness research have noted that Brown and Levinson’s adoption of Goffman’s face-concept has many problematic aspects (Arundale 2006, Held 2017). In many recent publications, therefore, relational work or relationship management has become a key concept (Locher, Watts 2008, Spencer-Oatey 2008). It is not clear, however, if the concept of relational work replaces facework, or if it is just another aspect of communication, and how the relationship between facework, relational work and politeness can be modelled. In other words, without a clear definition of relational work and a distinction between relation and face we cannot really define what exactly we do when we use address pronouns in a polite way. And if we do not know this, it will be impossible to explain the dynamics of politeness change.

In the remarks made above on the communicative functions of address pronouns, one possible interpretation of the notion of politeness can be identified: it was stated that the use of a particular address pronoun communicates an idea concerning the relationship between speaker and hearer – which implies that the predominant function of an utterance perceived as polite is not the prevention or the repair of some potential face threatening act, but rather the construction, maintenance/confirmation or redefinition of a relationship. Goffman emphasized the importance of this kind of activity for any kind of interaction:

When persons theretofore unacquainted come into each other's immediate presence, the fact that their relationship is anonymous, or at best has just begun not to be, is made evident for them and others by means of many signs. Similarly, when those with an anchored relation come into unobstructed range for effecting social contact, the fact that theirs is not an anonymous relation is made evident. Indeed, in both cases the participants are under subtle obligation to treat each other in such a manner that these bits of intelligence incidentally become available. (Goffman 1971, p. 194)

Goffman presents relational activity as a regular and very important part of any communicative interaction, as a necessary condition for the possibility of communication. According to this point of view, we could hardly communicate without establishing contact and contextualising/qualifying this contact in terms of social variables. Certain linguistic models of interactions have discussed those variables e.g. by Leech, (2014, p. 103), Holly (1979 and 2001) or by Kretzenbacher (2010, p. 15), who posited four dimensions for the definition of relationships:

1. Horizontal distance: e.g. degree of knowledge, intimacy
2. Vertical distance: power, status
3. Communicative esteem (evaluation): self- and partner evaluation
4. Sympathy.

The idea that this kind of relational work is one of the central functions of communication is widely accepted in many pragmatic approaches. I will introduce it as the “missing link” between the description of the use of address forms and the concept of politeness and, afterwards, as the theoretical basis for an explanatory approach to politeness change. In order to do this, it is necessary to look briefly at a model of communication in general and the role of relational work in particular. In the aforementioned publication, Keller (2018) derives an exhaustive list of communicative functions (or benefits) from the Gricean maxims. Grice himself already specified that his model of rational interaction based on the

Cooperative Principle and its four maxims would not be enough to explain communication, because there are communicative purposes he did not take into account, and that for those purposes it would be necessary to formulate other maxims. One further maxim would be “Be polite.” (Grice 1975, p. 28). If politeness is, as claimed before, a means to establish, define or redesign relationships, a general model of communication could be represented as in Figure 2:

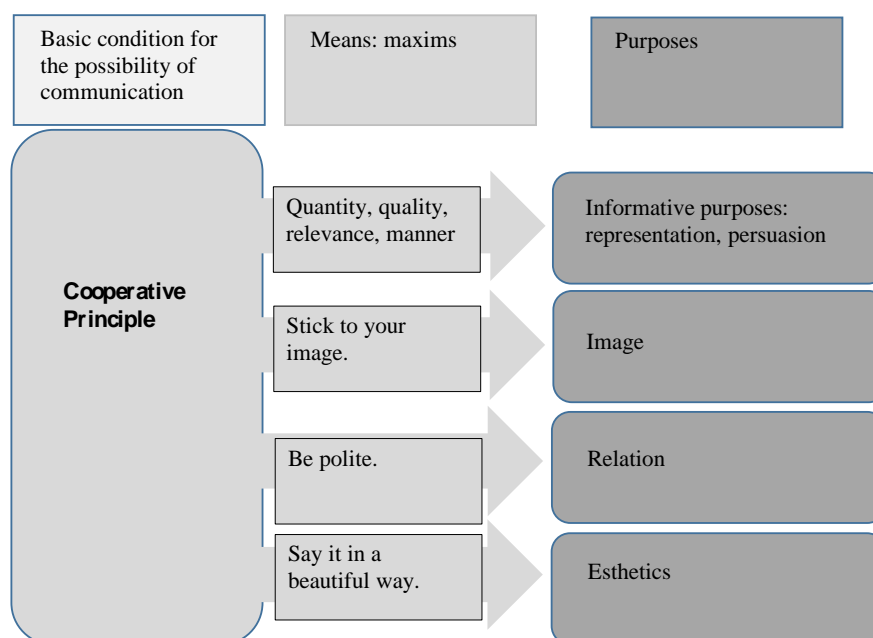


Figure 2

Cooperative Principle, Maxims and Purposes of communication based on Keller 2018: 291 (Ehrhardt 2018).

The maxims in this model are conceived as generally accepted and reciprocally expected means to achieve communicative aims. It is a good strategy to be clear and relevant if we want to inform our interlocutor of something. Likewise, it is a good strategy to be polite if we want to construct or maintain a relationship that allows us to communicate without difficulty. Politeness is, according to this idea, in a given situation a normal, expected design of the utterance in terms of the relational work they accomplish. Unlike the rather similar proposal made by Pfister (2010), it clearly distinguishes between relational work and facework, which would be part of the image-function. A speaker perceived as polite does relational work to the degree and in the way members of his/her community of practice expect him/her to act. Obviously, what constitutes “normal behaviour” may vary from one community to another. There is no universally accepted idea of relevance – and there is no strategy of politeness that will do for every situation. Such diversities of expectations will be accounted for in second-order-maxims. When applied to politeness, these could be maxims like “Show deference”, “Keep your distance”, “Show sympathy”, “Show modesty”. Their nature and their use may also vary historically. Their precise form must be the result of empirical enquiry in different cultural and sociological contexts.

The concept of politeness as the expected form and amount of relational effort promoted here is very general and basic. It clearly is a scientific construct in the sense of politeness<sup>2</sup>. Politeness appears to be the relational design of an utterance. The utterance is polite if speaker and hearer agree upon its acceptability in the situation in which the interaction occurs. The concept has to be refined with submaxims. In this general form, it has the advantage of being applicable to any situation and during any historical period and

therefore functions as the *tertium comparationis* for diachronic and contrastive analysis.

Like any maxim, the politeness maxim can be flouted. And, indeed, it is very likely to be flouted because of the outdoing-game mentioned above. A speaker who wants to convey his/her esteem for the hearer can do this in a conventionalized form. In this case he/she follows the maxim of politeness and does what he/she is expected to do in the situation. But a standard way of expressing something is clearly not special – it will not be enough for a speaker who wishes to show particular deference towards, sympathy for or appreciation of the hearer. But now she/he has the possibility to do something more, e.g. use the plural or the third person to address his/her partner. At this point she/he communicates with an implicature: the hearer has to infer the intention of the speaker. If this works and if a certain number of members of the community of practice have analogous communicative intentions, this individual act may bring about the conventionalization of a new form, even if she/he did not originally intend to create a more deferential address pronoun or another new structure, but just wanted to express an attitude towards the interlocutor.

The case outlined above would be a typical example of an invisible-hand process, which explains an explanandum as a causal, but not intended consequence of individual acts having, at least partly, the same intention (Keller 1994, p. 67ff.). In other words: a polite speaker communicates his/her intention to be polite and therefore acts intentionally. That is, what he/she intends to do on the individual level is to transmit his/her idea concerning the relationship with the addressee and his/her hypothesis concerning the addressee's idea about this relationship. If he/she decides to use unconventional forms, he/she might cause language/politeness change in the way mentioned before. This would be an effect on the collective level, which was not aimed at.

An approach like the one just presented can account for the fact that address pronouns and other communicative politeness devices change not because politeness as a language-independent social system influences language, but because speakers use language to communicate and their communicative acts may have unintended effects on the language system, as they are adopted by larger and larger sections of society.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The discussion has shown that there is and has to be a close connection between diachronic views on politeness and general concepts of politeness when aiming to explain, and not merely describe, politeness change. A valid, or at least plausible, explanation has to find the link between individual communicative behaviour and the collective level of language structure. This requires a theoretical investigation into the nature of politeness and its relevance for communication in general. If this relation between politeness and communication is theoretically designed, it becomes possible to see politeness change as an example of the invisible-hand process in language use and change. According to this view, every individual speaker in performing a speech act has to communicate, among other things, her or his definition of the relationship to the partners. In this, she/he is guided by general principles like the CP and its maxims, which explain what “normal language users” would do and are expected to do in this situation. In some situations, following the general principles will not be enough for the speaker to express her/his conception of the relation to the listener – the speaker feels particularly close to the partner, wants to show her/his extraordinary respect or something similar. The speaker might decide to flout the maxim of politeness and do more than would normally be

expected, and make a particular communicative effort on the relational level. If this works, and if the addressee really feels he/she is being treated with affection or is being deeply respected, an analogous communicative effort may be made by other speakers. In the long run, in this way, an extraordinary communicative act may become the new rule. And the form that had up until then been the “normal, expectable level” of politeness might appear rude. Maxims can be seen as the link between individual actions and collective regularities and expectations. In particular, the politeness maxim can be described as mediating between the individual and collective level in terms of relationship management in communication.

The considerations proposed in this contribution are far from being a complete explanation of the evolution of address pronouns or other linguistic features related to politeness. However, they suggest what would need to be discussed in more detail in order to account for why and how linguistic politeness changes.

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