

The versatility of pronouns and shifting identity

October 20 2016

A new scientific study reveals the fascinating ways in which we use pronouns to negotiate social identity. While much of the recent popular discussion on the topic of pronouns and social identity has focused on how third person pronouns in English (she/he and his/her vs. they) establish fixed gender identities, this study focuses on how second person (you) pronouns in Spanish can be used to communicate shifts in a range of different social identities. The study, "Linguistic reference in the negotiation of identity and action: Revisiting the T/V distinction", by Chase Wesley Raymond at the University of Colorado, Boulder, was published in the September, 2016 issue of the scholarly journal *Language*.

The "T/V distinction" used in the article's title references an often-studied aspect of linguistic research: Many languages possess what is called a 'T/V distinction'—for example, Tu vs. Vous in French, Tú vs. Usted in Spanish, and so on—in which the T form is said to be the non-deferential, socially intimate, or 'informal' you, while the V form is said to show deference, to be more socially distant, and to be the 'formal' you.

The data in this study demonstrate that, contrary to how they have been treated in prior research, the notions of 'identity' and 'context' cannot be taken as pre-existent, static, or altogether 'given'. After all, each of us possesses an infinite number of identities simultaneously: Someone can be your boss, and a lawyer, and a mother, and your best friend, and... Which one(s) of these many identities is salient at any given moment in a

conversation depends on what the speakers are doing with one another; and what they're doing with one another can change over the course of a single interaction—and thus so can their selection between forms of you. In using these different forms of address, speakers can highlight or foreground different aspects of their own and their interlocutor's identities at different moments in the ongoing talk, in accordance with how those identities are relevant to whatever it is they are trying to get done.

The article examines a corpus of data for 1000+ speakers and several hundred hours of recorded conversation. The study included speakers of Spanish from ten countries, reflecting multiple dialects within each of those nations. The contexts studied included: casual in-person and telephone conversations between people who are friends and/or family, consultations between doctors and patients, emergency calls to 911, and political news interviews.

This path-breaking study confirms that various aspects of our identities are often fleeting—invoked for a purpose and then negotiated, challenged, defended, abandoned, modified, etc., as the conversation progresses onward in new directions. Nonetheless, no matter how fleeting, who we are as social beings is made up of the different identity 'hats' we wear. This research contributes to our understanding of how speakers make use of the grammar of their language to both reflect, as well as constitute, these identities on a moment-by-moment basis as we engage in interaction with one another.

More information: Chase Wesley Raymond, Linguistic reference in the negotiation of identity and action: Revisiting the T/V distinction, *Language* (2016). [DOI: 10.1353/lan.2016.0053](https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2016.0053) , A pre-print version of the article may be found at:

http://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/archived-documents/Raymond_92_3.pdf .

Provided by Linguistic Society of America

Citation: The versatility of pronouns and shifting identity (2016, October 20) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-10-versatility-pronouns-shifting-identity.html>

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