

○ VARIATION IN SWEDISH ADDRESS PRACTICES

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This article explores variation in address in contemporary Swedish in Sweden-Swedish and Finland-Swedish. The research is part of a large-scale Australian project on changes in the address systems of French, German and Swedish. The present article focuses on results from 72 social network interviews conducted in Sweden (Gothenburg) and Finland (Vaasa). Both quantitative results (questionnaire part) and qualitative results (interview part) are presented. The findings suggest that the V pronoun of address – *ni* – is gradually disappearing in both national varieties. This tendency is clearly stronger in Sweden-Swedish; in spoken Sweden-Swedish V hardly exists any more, except for a controversial re-entry in communication between the young and middle-aged and the very old in service encounters (c.f. Mårtensson 1986). Furthermore the results indicate that there is considerable variation between written (impersonal) and spoken Sweden-Swedish with a much higher acceptance for the V pronoun in written, impersonal contexts. The study demonstrates that national variation is considerable with much more use of V in Finland-Swedish.

INTRODUCTION

This study is part of a comparative project *Address in some western European languages* (see Kretzenbacher et al., and Warren in this issue). The project examined changes in the address systems in French, German and Swedish, as used in five countries (France, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Finland respectively), using a range of methods of data collection, including interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, participant observation and chat groups. The present article reports on research undertaken in Gothenburg in Sweden and Vaasa in Finland. More specifically, it concerns the reported use of pronouns of address, first names vs. titles and surnames, and the avoidance of address. Gothenburg, in the south-west is the second largest city of Sweden with a population of approximately 500,000. Vaasa is much smaller, with only about 60,000 inhabitants, but is nevertheless a regional centre in the north-western part of Finland. Swedish is an official minority language in Finland with about 6% of the population having Swedish as their first lan-

guage. In Vaasa the proportion of Swedish speakers is much larger (25%), and Vaasa is surrounded by monolingual Swedish municipalities.

BACKGROUND TO ADDRESS IN SWEDISH

Compared to other European languages such as German or French, there have been dramatic changes in the Swedish pronominal address system in the past 100 years. The complex historical development of the Swedish address pronouns *du* (T) and *ni* (V) had to do with the previously widespread use of titles, where *ni* was predominantly used to address somebody who lacked a title, but who in turn had to respond with the superior person's title (Ahlgren 1978, 78). This led to a non-reciprocal usage (Wellander 1935, 9), creating a situation where Swedish – at least in Sweden – lacked a neutral, polite form of address. Since *ni* had attracted negative connotations because of its use socially downwards, it could no longer be employed among the aristocracy and social elite to signal distance. The only possibility remaining was to use the interlocutor's title and consistently avoid direct address by pronouns altogether. Erik Wellander a well-known language cultivator in the early 1900s, was a strong advocate for the (re)introduction of *ni* as a polite form of address (Wellander 1935). Despite more than 100 years of struggle to get *ni* socially accepted, the project was not to succeed. This is partly because it was of no relevance to the majority of the population: the working classes had always addressed one another by *du* and the use of titles was a matter mostly for the social elite.

However, one other major factor also played a role in the unsuccessful attempt to establish *ni* as a polite form of address. It simply came too late (Paulston 1976, 365). The informal *du* had – in the 1960s and 1970s – begun to spread rapidly. In part this can be attributed to the cumbersome use of titles and avoidance of *ni*, but it has also been explained as a change from below, among ordinary people (Ahlgren 1978, 84-85). A democratic, no-nonsense form of address based on solidarity resonated with the egalitarian ideals of the late 1960s in Sweden. This development was by no means without problems, as different groups of people tended to operate according to different norms of use (Paulston 1976). While Paulston's research confirms the rapid shift during the 1960 and 70s towards an egalitarian system embracing a universal *du*, Mårtensson (1986) describes the new emergence of the V pronoun *ni*, now in a much less hierarchy-related and deferential function. The developing new binary choice in pronominal address was confirmed in studies by Norrby (1997) and Ridell (2001). However, a recent study of reported use in a service encounter situation found no support for the V form re-emerging (Norrby and Håkansson 2004).

The situation in Finland-Swedish is somewhat different. In general, Finland-Swedish has been characterised as more formal and indirect than Sweden-Swedish (Reuter 1992; Saari 1995), and includes a higher incidence of titles and *ni* (Fremer 1998). This has been explained by influence from Finnish communicative patterns (Saari 1995). However, it is important to point out that both Fremer's and Saari's discussions concern Helsinki Swedish. No large-scale study has been conducted in any other parts of Swedish-speaking Finland before the present study.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data for this article consist of 72 interviews, consisting of a questionnaire part and an interview part, equally distributed over the two research sites. The interviews were organised as 12 network interviews, each consisting of one base informant and five members of his/her network (e.g. family, friends, work colleagues). In particular the article draws on the questionnaire, which was analysed quantitatively, but qualitative results from the interview will be used to further illustrate the discussion as appropriate. The age range in Gothenburg was 22 to 76 with an average age of 42.4, and in Vaasa the age span was from 19 to 83, with an average age of 43.5. Overall, there were more female informants (41 to 31), which was due to a gender imbalance in the Vaasa networks, with 24 females compared to 12 males.

The questionnaire sought the informants' reported use of T or V, and in some cases use of first name/surname + title or first name/kinship term, when addressing somebody in a number of different situations. These concerned several domains: the public domain (e.g. how the respondent would address a stranger in the street, a shop-assistant, a police-officer, etc.); the private domain (e.g. addressing family members, friends); and the workplace (e.g. addressing colleagues, superiors, clients). In total there were 31 situations where the informants were asked how they would address the interlocutor in question. Due to the prevalent use of the T form in both Swedish varieties, it was selected as the base form. The term 'non-T' will be used throughout this article to refer not only to V (*ni*), but also avoidance strategies, address in the third person and cases where respondents indicate use of either V or T depending on the situational context.

The results section is organised as follows. First the situations with substantial non-T use in both sites will be presented and discussed. Then follows a discussion of some further situations, which led to a high level of non-T use only in Vaasa. Finally, one of the interview questions dealing with the informants' experience of unexpected address

will be discussed in some detail to shed further light on the main results of the questionnaire part.

RESULTS

Overall the questionnaire data demonstrate a very strong tendency towards use of T (*du*) in both research sites. In half of the situations at least 80% of the informants reported use of T. This trend was particularly strong in Gothenburg, where 67% of the situations yielded at least 80% reported use of T. Conversely, only four (13%) of the questions gave rise to substantial reported use of non-T (substantial use means that approximately 50% of the informants reported the use of non-T). The tendency towards non-T was stronger in Vaasa, with substantial non-T use in 29% of all situations.

Accordingly there is an overwhelming preference for T address, as reported in the questionnaire data. This trend is also substantiated by the interview data, as illustrated by the following quotes from Vaasa. The first describes the contemporary situation in Finland-Swedish, and the second refers to the situation in neighbouring Sweden:

Det har blivit mera och mera du mot det som var ni för en 20-25 år tillbaka, då var det ni och nu är det du överallt, åtminstone i Vasa.

[It has become more and more *du* compared to what was *ni* about 20-25 years ago, then it was *ni* and now it is *du* everywhere, at least in Vaasa.]

(Vaasa, male project manager, 30)

Jag tror man är mer duande i Sverige, ja, eller har varit längre åtminstone...och kanske det är bara kungen där som man inte duar.

[I think they are more 'du-ing' in Sweden, yeah, or have been for a long time at least... and perhaps it is only the king there that they don't say *du* to.]

(Vaasa, female teacher, 51)

SITUATIONS OF NON-T USE

Only four situations gave rise to substantial reported use of non-T in both Gothenburg and Vaasa, namely: addressing a much older stranger in the street of the same sex; a

stranger of the opposite sex; a friend of grandparents; and in an email to a stranger. The number and proportion of respondents who indicated that they would not use the T-form are shown in Table 1. Numbers in brackets refer to the total number of responses for each of the situations.

Situation	Reported use of non-T			
	Gothenburg		Vaasa	
Stranger, much older, same sex	17 (36)	47%	25 (36)	69%
Stranger, much older, same sex	20 (36)	56%	26 (36)	72%
Friend of grandparent	17 (32)	53%	16 (34)	47%
Email to stranger	16 (35)	46%	20 (30)	67%

Table 1 Situations of non-T use in both research sites

The level of non-T use is generally higher in the Finland-Swedish data, with the exception of addressing friends of grandparents, where the reported use of non-T is slightly higher in Gothenburg. We will look at each of these situations in more detail below.

ADDRESSING A STRANGER IN THE STREET

The age of the addressee is an important factor in three of the situations described above, in that older age consistently results in high levels of non-T use. This is further underscored by the overall results for ‘Addressing a stranger in the street’ where there were great differences in how the informants responded, depending on the age of the addressee. In addressing somebody of the same age or younger, all informants in Gothenburg indicated that they would use T, and almost all in Vaasa (ranging from 94% to 97% T-use), whereas the level of T-use is considerably lower when addressing a much older person, as outlined in Table 1. However, it seems to be a question of absolute old age, rather than relative age differences, as the respondents who claim to use non-T in this situation are quite evenly distributed from young to old.

Furthermore, there is more variation in non-T use in the Sweden-Swedish data. The results for addressing an older stranger in the street demonstrate that the address patterns are more complex in Sweden-Swedish, with not only V but also avoidance, third person address, and use of either T or V, depending on the situation/context. In Vaasa, on the other hand, the situation is much more straightforward, with use of V only (Table 2):

	V	T/V	Other*	Total non-T responses
Gothenburg	11	3	3	17
Vaasa	25	0	0	25

Table 2 Variation in non-T use to an older stranger of the same sex
 * Other = avoidance of address altogether or use of third person address (title)

ADDRESSING FRIENDS OF GRANDPARENTS

Old age is inherent in the situation where respondents were asked how they would address friends of their grandparents. This is also the only situation (of 31) where the level of reported non-T use is higher in Gothenburg than in Vaasa, although the difference is minimal (53% vs. 47%). Again, the variation in the non-T use is much more pronounced in the Sweden-Swedish data, with higher levels of avoidance, third person address or variation, depending on context, as illustrated in Table 3:

	V+F	T/V+F	V+ –	Other*	Total non-T responses
Gothenburg	2	3	2	10	17
Vaasa	10	1	3	2	16

Table 3 Variation in non-T use to friends of grandparents
 F = first name, ‘–’ = no name, * Other = avoidance of address or use of third person address (title)

ADDRESS IN EMAIL TO A STRANGER

One of the four situations with high non-T use did not involve age as a stated factor, but explored the possible impact of the medium on the choice of address. The pattern of more variation in the Sweden-Swedish data is repeated in this situation. As can be seen from Table 4, there is more reported use of non-T in Vaasa (67%), but less variation, with V by far the most frequently stated form (57%), whereas most Gothenburg informants who do not unequivocally state T-use opt for variation between T and V, depending on situation and context.

From our focus group data, collected at the beginning of the project, we know that people worry about their address usage in writing, and even in Sweden where *du* is so dominant, people report that they hesitate in writing, in particular if the situation is perceived as formal (Clyne et al. 2006; Norrby 2004, 2005). The relatively high preference for using a non-T form in an email, particularly in Vaasa, has some interesting parallels

in the interview data, where respondents were asked how they would begin a letter to somebody they did not know. As can be gleaned from the responses, there are fairly clear-cut differences between the two research sites. All responses are listed in Table 5, roughly arranged from most to least formal type of greeting.

	V	T/V	Other*	Total non-T responses
Gothenburg	5	8	3	16
Vaasa	17	2	1	20

Table 4 Variation in non-T use in email to a stranger
* Other = avoidance of address altogether or use of third person address (title)

Phrase	Gothenburg	Vaasa
<i>Ärade</i> (Esteemed) + title + surname	0	1
Title + surname	0	4
<i>Bästa/e</i> (lit. 'Best') + title + surname	2	9
<i>Till den det berör*/ Beträffande*/ Angående*/jag skriver med anledning av...</i> (To whom it may concern/ Regarding/Regarding/ I am writing regarding....)	6	1
<i>Bästa/e</i> (lit. Best) + first name + surname	3	5
<i>Bästa/e</i> (lit. Best) + first name	1	2
<i>Till</i> (To) First name + surname	1	1
<i>Kära</i> (Dear) + surname	0	1
First name + surname	1	3
<i>Hej</i> (Hello, hi)	9	4
<i>Hej</i> + First name + surname	2	2
<i>Hej</i> + First name	3	0
First name	2	0
Depends on situation	4	0
Don't know/no reply	2	3
TOTAL no of responses:	36	36

Table 5 How would you start a letter to somebody you do not know?
* formal letter to (e.g.) government authority

In the Sweden-Swedish data the most prevalent type of greeting is simply *Hej* ('hi'), whereas the Finland-Swedes report favouring a much more formal greeting (*Bästa/e*, lit. 'best'), followed by the title and surname, or by first name and surname. The second most frequent type of response in the Sweden-Swedish data, however, is also a more formal one, but of a type which explicitly avoids direct address or refers to the addressee in the third person ('To Whom it May Concern', etc.).

The tendency among the Finland-Swedish respondents to select more formal greetings, which also call for an explicit mentioning of title and name, underscores the general picture of Finland-Swedish as (still) being more formal than Sweden-Swedish. This is further substantiated by the fact that the Swedish informants tend to select more informal greetings and use first names more frequently compared to the Finland-Swedes, as Table 5 shows. Furthermore, the explicit inclusion of the addressee's title and full name sets up the expectation that the recipient of the letter will be addressed directly in the text. In the Sweden-Swedish data, however, the preferred greetings explicitly avoid direct reference to the addressee, and minimise the expectation of direct address in the body of the letter. As we have seen, in the four situations of non-T use there is a much higher incidence of avoidance of address in Sweden-Swedish, and in general more variation, whereas the Finland-Swedish respondents tend to report using the V form (*ni*) in such situations.

The interview question did not explicitly seek information on what type of address the writer would use. Nevertheless some informants included such comments. In particular this is the case in Vaasa, where seven informants said they would use V, one would avoid address altogether, and three indicated that they would use T. In Gothenburg only two informants made specific comments on address, both saying that they would avoid addressing the person directly.

ADDITIONAL SITUATIONS OF NON-T USE IN VAASA

There were a further five situations which yielded substantial use of non-T in the Vaasa corpus only, namely: addressing a much older police officer of the same sex, of the opposite sex, friends of parents, clients, and a teacher in school. For the purpose of comparison, the results for these situations in both research locations are shown in Table 6:

Situation	Reported use of non-T	
	Gothenburg	Vaasa
Police officer, much older, same sex	8%	64%
Police officer, much older, opposite sex	8%	67%
Friend of parents	25%	53%
Client	23%	66%
Teachers in school	39%	43%

Table 6 Situations yielding substantial non-T use in Vaasa only

The question which gave rise to the greatest differences between the two sites concerns a situation in the public sphere, namely how you would address a police officer. As can be seen from Table 7, there are not only great differences between the two sites, but the interlocutor's age is a decisive factor for address behaviour in Vaasa, whereas the Gothenburg data point to no (or very minimal) differences based on age in this situation:

Police officer who is:	Reported use of non-T	
	Gothenburg	Vaasa
Same age, same sex	0%	25%
Same age, opposite sex	0%	25%
Much older, same sex	8%	64%
Much older, opposite sex	8%	67%
Younger, same sex	0%	17%
Younger opposite sex	0%	17%

Table 7 Addressing a police officer

Once again, the age of the addressee turns out to be of great importance for the choice of address in Vaasa, but how are we to explain the fact that the informants from Gothenburg do not make any age-based differences to speak of? As outlined above, addressing a much older stranger in the street was one of the few situations which yielded substantial non-T use in Sweden. The explanation of the seemingly contradictory tendencies most likely has to do with how the respondents have interpreted 'older'. In the case of the stranger in the street, respondents were free to construct their own image of how old a much older person would be, whereas in the police officer scenario the much older officer would have to be below retirement age, or at least not much older than 65. A possible explanation of the discrepancy between the research sites thus could be that

the Gothenburg and Vaasa informants differ in their views about how old a person needs to be to be addressed by V.

Such a line of reasoning is supported by the interview data. The respondents were asked to indicate from what age a person should be addressed by V, and the results demonstrate interesting differences: in Vaasa the average age for being addressed by *ni* was 65, ranging from 40 to 90, whereas the Swedish counterpart was an average of 77, with a range from 65 to 100. Based on these data, we might speculate that the stranger in the Swedish street was constructed by the respondents as an elderly person, and thus old enough for V address, whereas the Swedish older police officer is still far too young for most respondents to trigger V. In Vaasa, on the contrary, the older police officer's age coincides neatly with the age from which the respondents think it appropriate to use V.

However, we cannot exclude the possibility that another factor – status – has influenced the Vaasa informants as well in this situation. In the focus groups one clear-cut result was a higher sensitivity to status differences in triggering more formal address practices among the Vaasa focus group participants, while this trend was absent in the Gothenburg focus group (Norrby 2005). In contrast, some members of the Swedish focus group even mentioned that perceived higher status of the addressee would not lead them to abandoning a universal T, with one well-known exception, namely addressing members of the royal family (Norrby 2004).

One of the other situations that led to substantial differences between the two sites was addressing a client: 66% of the Vaasa informants stated that they would use non-T, whereas the Gothenburg participants reported a much lower level of non-T (23%). It is possible that this discrepancy could be explained by the sensitivity to status differences mentioned by the Vaasa informants, or at least a perception of a client or customer being worthy of formal treatment. In conclusion, the fact that the Vaasa informants consistently reported higher levels of non-T use, and in more situations, supports the general claim that is often made that Finland-Swedes are more formal in their address habits than Sweden-Swedes. This is also substantiated by the interview data. In Vaasa the majority (22 of 34 who responded to the question) claim that Sweden-Swedish is less formal and more prone to universal use of T, whereas Finland-Swedish is seen as more old-fashioned, although heavily influenced by Sweden-Swedish, in particular in Ostrobothnia due to the geographical proximity to Sweden. However, five informants are of the opinion that V (*ni*) is more frequent in Sweden, five do not think there are any differences, and two do not know. In Gothenburg the pattern is repeated, as most are of the opinion that Finland-Swedish is more formal with use of V, titles and surnames (16 of 36), and nobody

expresses the view that Finland-Swedish uses more T than Sweden-Swedish. However, a trend in the Swedish data is that many (13) do not have a view on address practices in Finland-Swedish.

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN ADDRESSED IN A WAY YOU DID NOT EXPECT?

One of the interview questions dealt with unexpected address. Hardly surprisingly, nobody reported unexpected T. In Gothenburg 27 participants reported having been unexpectedly addressed by non-T, in most cases by the V pronoun (18), but unexpected title is also mentioned (7). The overall reported level of such unexpected address was lower in Vaasa (17), and was evenly distributed between being addressed by V (8) and by a title (9).

When the Gothenburg informants comment on unexpected address they often refer to one specific type of situation, namely service encounters. Such V address is deplored and often described in colourful language, as illustrated by the following quote:

ja, av äckliga unga manliga och kvinnliga expediter i tjustiga dyra affärer. Jag blir kränkt, jag känner mig som att jag är tusen år gammal eller som att dom tror att jag är dum i huvudet [...] inte trevligt, känns oerhört fånigt och förlegat, det har ju varit en du-reform.

[yes, by disgusting young male and female shop assistants in fashionable expensive shops. I feel humiliated, I feel like I am a thousand years old or that they think that I am stupid [...] not nice, feels incredibly silly and out of date, there has been a du-reform after all.]

(Gothenburg, female prosecutor, 31)

In Vaasa, however, the situations for unexpected address are quite different. Participants predominantly speak of young students or young people in general using V to be polite, and only two informants mention being addressed by non-T in service encounters. However, such address clearly does not invoke the same negative connotations as it does for many Swedes:

‘Fröken Anna’ [...] kanske känns lite ovanligt. Jag är så där väldigt fri av mig så jag behöver inte tilltalas med någon titel. Oftast i affärssammanhang eller bank – jag har varit kund. Smickrande, jag reagerade positivt men det kändes ovanligt.

[‘Miss Anna’ [...] perhaps felt a bit unusual. I am like very free spirited so I don’t need to be addressed by a title. Most often in business contexts or the bank – I have been a customer. Flattering, I reacted positively, but it felt unusual.]

(Vaasa, female casual teacher and project manager, 24)

One of the situations in the questionnaire required respondents to say how they would address a shop-assistant they did not know, and how they expected to be addressed by such a person (see Table 8).

Type of address		Gothenburg	Vaasa
reciprocal T:		21	23
reciprocal V:		0	5
I give V	receive T:	1	4
I give T	receive T/V:	5	4
I give T	receive V:	2	0
I give V	receive T/V:	1	0
I give pl V	receive T/V:	1	0
I give pl V	receive V:	1	0
I avoid T/V	receive T:	2	0
Total responses:		34	36

Table 8 How would you address a shop-assistant you do not know and how would such a person address you?
PI V= plural V, i.e. as if addressing the shop as a plural collective rather than the specific interlocutor.

Reciprocal T is, as expected, by far the most common both in Vaasa and Gothenburg. Once again we see that the trend of less variation is borne out in the Vaasa data, whereas the Swedish respondents nominated a much larger variety of address practices. As detailed above, the Gothenburg informants typically mentioned service encounters as a situation where they had unexpectedly been addressed by V, particularly by younger staff. In the questionnaire data there is barely any mention of this, as only two respondents in Gothenburg report being addressed by V while they themselves would use T in such a scenario. However, the re-introduction of V as a polite pronoun – in particular in various service situations – has been a recurring topic in newspaper articles and letters to the editor in the past two decades. It is thus possible that our informants are aware of this, and if they have been addressed by V in such a situation they are likely to remem-

ber and report it. However, the questionnaire data demonstrate that the actual level of service encounter V is low.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

T is by far the most frequently reported form in both varieties, and this trend is particularly strong in Sweden-Swedish. However, use of V, avoidance of address, third person address, and variation between T and V (subsumed under the heading non-T), exist in a limited number of situations. The most important factors that determine an informant's reported use of non-T are:

1. *The age of the addressee* – an old (unfamiliar) addressee is much more likely to receive non-T, in particular in Vaasa. The differences between the sites are at least partly explained by differing norms for 'V-age'. However, the age of the informant does not seem to have an impact, as those who claim to use non-T are quite evenly distributed from young to old.
2. *Level of familiarity* – only strangers are likely to receive non-T at both sites, but in Vaasa there is also a tendency for non-T in addressing work-related (unfamiliar) contacts such as clients.
3. *Medium* – the written medium (email, letter) increases the likelihood for non-T use as well as more formal language in general, both in Gothenburg and Vaasa, but this trend is more strongly pronounced in Vaasa.
4. *Status* – there is some indication of status playing a role in Vaasa: older police officers routinely receive non-T, and also younger and same age police officers are sometimes addressed by non-T in Vaasa, but never in Gothenburg. Furthermore, the higher reported use of non-T in Vaasa to teachers in school and at university supports this trend.

While non-T use is more frequent and distributed over more situations in Vaasa, there is much more variation in non-T use in Gothenburg. A consistent finding is that the respondents in Vaasa typically select V, whereas there is a much higher incidence of avoidance and reported use of either T or V, depending on context, in Gothenburg. This in turn suggests that the Swedish respondents need to renegotiate their use of address forms continuously, taking into account various contextual factors. The fact that V is not selected particularly often by the Gothenburg informants indicates that V is still a problematic form of address in Sweden. In Finland-Swedish, on the other hand, V does

not appear to be linked to any particularly negative connotations, and is thus more readily employed in interactions with strangers, in particular older ones.

The re-emergence of a new, polite V to signal distance was first discussed by Mårtensson (1986), and has since been highlighted in the media from time to time. This study lends some limited support to the claim that V has been reintroduced in service encounters in Sweden, where young staff use V predominantly to older customers, but the overall levels are still low. It is evident not only from the network interviews but also from our focus group data and participant observation in Sweden that people are sensitive towards the re-emerging *ni*, and the attitudes towards it are mixed. For some it simply signals polite distance, whereas for others it has connotations of an old class-based society where *ni* was only ever used socially downwards. Whether the new *ni* will gain ground and spread into other domains is still an open question. However, for the time being it is limited in use, and particularly in Sweden it seems to be more of a social veneer which is quickly abandoned for T when the nature of the encounter changes.¹

ENDNOTES

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