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Address forms in conversations on social media[1]

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Abstract

The goal of the paper is to present addressing practices characteristic of discourse on social media by analysing two Facebook conversations. As the analysis shows, address forms have several roles including the identification of discourse participants, the evoking of patterns of face-to-face spoken discourse, the expression of emotions, and the increasing or reduction of social distance. In the absence of physical presence, discourse participants engaging in internet-based communication cannot rely on nonverbal channels for the construal of social relationships, thus more significance is attached to linguistic devices in general and the patterns specifically marking social relationships in particular. Both conversations (a series of congratulations, and a debate within a Facebook group) feature address forms in a high number and in varied functions. Address forms in congratulatory messages not only construe social relationships but also represent them for the public. In the public debate, addressing practices indicate the convergence or divergence of opinions, and by identifying discourse participants, they also play a role in the delimitation of smaller units within the overall group conversation.

Keywords: address forms; vocatives; T/V forms of address; social media; Facebook conversations

Subject-Affiliation in New CEEOL: Language and Literature – Applied Linguistics – Sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

With internet use spreading to the point of being ubiquitous, several new scenes of communication and genres have emerged. This has also given rise to new rules for engaging in linguistic interactions, rules which are specific to the communicative contexts and particular genres involved. In highly networked, multimedial, interactive environments, relationships between speaker, addressee, audience, channel, theme and arrangement have undergone sweeping changes, with new types of speech events evoking novel linguistic devices and practices.

The goal of my paper is to demonstrate the importance of address forms in conversations conducted on social media sites, with regard to what varied roles

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they can play, and what varied functions they can have in the shaping of social relations. In addition to data from unstructured observations, my description of the phenomenon will be informed by the analysis of two lengthier prototypical Facebook conversations.

The paper first presents general communicative features of conversations on social media sites (2), then discusses variants of address forms typical of internet-mediated conversations along with their functions (3), presents the conversations that serve as empirical material for the analysis, and introduces the analytic criteria (4), discusses and interprets the research results (5), and finally offers a brief summary.

2. Conversations on social media sites

With the advent of web 2.0, social media sites have become highly popular in internet-mediated communication, and the previous object-centric approach has been superseded by a person-centric network (cf. Peters 2009, Szűts 2012, Veszelszki 2014). Social media sites have also transformed the world of networked communication by enhancing the role of identifiable participants (supplementing the fictitious, virtual identities characteristic of many internet forums and chat sites). These newly emerging online identities are closely bound up with corresponding offline identities, evolving dynamically as the two types of identity shape each other (cf. Fehér 2014, 140–141).

The interactive nature of web 2.0, the person-centric structure of social media sites, and the continuous online presence of participants are communicative factors that significantly bear on the linguistic construal of relationships with discourse partners, including the use of address forms.

Conversations on social media sites, including Facebook posts and the comments they receive, can be characterized as delayed discourses of variable degrees of interactivity (cf. Bódi 2010). Despite their written medium and the asynchronous nature of the conversation, they also feature linguistic devices of prototypical conversations, assigning a key role to the interactive function of language use, i.e. the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relations (cf. Brown–Yule 1983, 1–4).

Conversations on social media sites generate peculiar communicative situations in terms of degree of publicity. In sociolinguistics, a distinction is typically made between intimate, personal, social and public spheres of communication (cf. Kiss 1995, 67); however, the communicative situation of conversations on social media prompts for a re-arrangement and re-evaluation of this scale. Compared to other scenes of communication, it is distinguished by the fact that communication intended to be personal may attain social relevance through being publicly accessible (cf. Bös–Kleinke 2017). Furthermore, in this context language users are less likely to perceive the pressure that a higher degree of publicity demands more careful linguistic elaboration; therefore, utterances intended for a broad public may also drift toward a personal tone. These factors underlie the fact that linguistic and stylistic devices in communication on social media sites seem more informal than those in

more traditional scenes of communication.

3. Functions of address forms on social media sites

3.1. Address forms and their functions

Address forms, i.e. reference to the addressee by linguistic elements (nominal and pronominal forms, inflectional morphemes), are devices that indicate the relationship between discourse participants more directly than other constructions, thus making a key contribution to the construal of social reality. 2nd and 3rd person forms of designating the speech partner, i.e. T and V forms of address[2] are continuously present and almost indispensable markers of the quality of social relations. Direct forms of address, i.e. vocative elements have several closely intertwined functions. Firstly, they prompt the speech partner to turn to the speaker, attracting her attention; secondly, they identify the addressee; thirdly, they also contribute to the maintenance and reinforcement of social relations (Leech 1999). Address forms may be interpreted as social deictic devices whose use allows for the shaping and regulation of social relations in subtle ways (Levinson 1983). Moreover, the use of address forms offers a wealth of opportunities for expressing emotions, and they are highly efficient for the purposes of reducing or increasing emotional distance between the discourse participants.

3.2. Variants of address forms on social media sites

In conversations on social media, speech partners may (i) already know each other from offline scenes of communication, (ii) only have a history of interactions on the internet, or (iii) interact for the first time in the conversation in question. The situation is all the more complex because all three types of dyad may occur within the same conversation. With regard to communicative features including address forms, a clear distinction can be made between conversations typically based on personal acquaintance conducted on personal sites and the conversations characteristic of thematic Facebook groups which often involve strangers and are reminiscent of internet forums.

It follows from the technical opportunities inherent in Facebook that the designation of particular users by tagging also contributes to the structure of conversations. The tag functions not only as a hypertext that leads to the personal Facebook profile of the user in question but also takes over the role of address forms. However, the use of tags does not exclusively serve the structuring of discourse; it also helps identify people in uploaded photos. In such cases, the tag functions as a mentioning rather than addressing form.

In conversations, tags typically fulfill two different vocative functions. Firstly, in conversations involving multiple participants and possibly divergent topics, they help identify the addressee and also aid readers by marking which turn of the conversation a comment replies to. The way addressing works here is similar to the

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2 Markers of a binary differentiation in references to the addressee, based on the French personal pronouns tu and vous, following the classical study of Brown and Gilman (1960). In terms of value attributions, T forms are typically considered more intimate, whereas V forms are more detached or more official.

conversational features of chats (Érsok 2007: 92), with the crucial difference that on media sites, tagging is not based on a nickname but rather on a personal profile, typically marked by a full name that is linked to a real person. Secondly, tags also have the function of drawing the attention of a person not yet participating in the conversation onto some content, post, or comment. This grabbing of attention is technically made possible by the fact that users are notified when their names have been mentioned by the use of a tag. These conative elements fulfill one of the most typical functions of vocatives by grabbing a person's attention. They often stand by themselves or else they are supplemented by other attention-directing messages (e.g. figyelj csak 'listen/look at this'; figyuzz 'listen/look at this'; látod ezt? 'can you see this?'; na? mit szólsz? 'so? what do you think?').

In conversations on personal Facebook sites, it is possible to observe the full repertoire of address forms characteristic of intimate/informal relationships. In addition to the multitude of given names, nicknames derived from given names, other kinds of nicknames, and forms including a possessive suffix, we also find a range of typical address forms expressing affection and intimacy (csillagom 'my star', édesem 'sweetheart', kedves 'dear', kedvesem 'my dear', babám 'my baby', tündérem 'my fairy').

In these personal relationships, address forms also often support jovial, playful communication. For example, the following comment to a Facebook user's photo posted from her workplace includes an archaic form of address: Oszt migyen-e a munka, Ténsasszony? 'And how's the work going, Her Ladyship?'. The utterance imitates the style of short remarks in archaic-folk contexts, and becomes playful and humorous by activating a scenario that is obviously at odds with internet-mediated communication.

Beyond personal Facebook profiles, various institutions, firms and communities also have profile pages, and much of the reading generated by news portals occurs through the Facebook posts they share. Moreover, groups also use Facebook as a platform; they may be created on the basis of any connection, shared goal or field of interest. The conversations taking the form of comment threads on non-personal pages are in many ways similar to conversations in forums, with the difference that participants engage in interactions with their personal identities (through links to their personal profiles). The presence of identifiable participants linked to real, offline identities has a fundamental influence on the use of address forms as well.

Conversations on social media sites show up characteristic informal patterns of interaction. Similarly to street communication, T forms may be regarded as prototypical in such discourses, and while it does not express intimacy per se (Hámori 2012, 238), it does contribute to a communicative style foregrounding personality. However, this online use of T also departs from the primarily age-based T of offline interactions. In the latter sphere, nominal forms of address are absent, whereas online T forms are often supplemented by jovial, playful or offensive nominal forms of address even in the conversation of strangers. In view of the co-occurrence of T with varied nomimal forms of address in social media, it seems plausible to suggest that while the general use of T in street communication can be best interpreted in the dimension of impersonal age-based solidarity, on the internet these T

forms may contribute to the linguistic elaboration of personality (cf. Hámori 2012, 245–248).

In posts and comments also engaging strangers in a conversation, vocatives foregrounding a larger community or various groups of users also play a prominent role. One type of group-oriented address forms includes devices which are common in everyday communication, typically in informal situations: gyerekek 'kids', emberek 'people', skacok 'lads', kedvesek 'dears.pl', mindnyájan 'everyone'. In group-directed forms of address initiating conversation, attributes characteristic of written addresses commonly appear (e.g. Kedves Mindenki! 'Dear All!'), but they may also be combined with greeting formulas typical of spoken discourse (e.g. Sziasztok, nép! 'Hello, folks!'). Address forms may also become more elaborate, adjusted to the topic and participants of the conversation, as in Hát, kedves tizenévesek, meg mindenki, akinek nem nőtt be a feje lágya! 'Well, dear teenagers and everybody else who hasn't grown up yet!'.

Forms of address may also have a special apostrophic function (Tátrai 2008, 121), when the speaker addresses her words not to the discourse partner but rather to a third party. In internet-mediated conversations, one characteristic and highly common manifestation of apostrophe is when the author of a comment addresses a person referred to in the original post or news item rather than participants of the conversation. Due to the general accessibility of internet contents, the comment may well reach the addressee, but the primary goal is to voice one's opinion in an emotionally charged way. In one case, the news portal 444.hu shared its news item about deficiencies in a politician's declaration of wealth on its Facebook profile along with a remark imitating dialectal speech and spoken discourse with the repetition of a vocative element (as if the politician could be directly addressed): János, János, hát mibű alakult át az a erdőszerkezet? 'John, John, but where did that forest structure come from?' (W1)

4. Data and methods of analysing address practices

In the present paper, I therefore analyse two different conversations publicly available on Facebook to explore the main features of addressing practices from the perspective of discourse (de Oliveira 2013, 305), because in line with international trends, this site has been the most widely used community space among Hungarian internet users in recent years (W2).

For exploring the functions of address forms in conversations conducted on users' personal sites based on personal acquaintances, I have chosen a discourse in which a piece of good news, the winning of an award is shared by a user, and this is followed by congratulating comments (some asking for further details) and reactions to the latter.3 As the speech act of congratulations has a role in expressing emotions, this is a type of post which brings a high number of vocative elements in its wake.

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3 Although the post is shared with the public, it is still personal in character. In the interest of protecting the personal rights of the user, I do not specify the URL here.

For exploring address forms in conversations involving both strangers and of-fline or online acquaintances, I have chosen to analyse vocative elements in the comments given to a post by Pesten hallottam 'I heard it in Budapest', a Facebook group specializing in storytelling and also having clearly identifiable core members (W3).4

Over the course of analysis, I attached a code to each address form in the two conversations, taking into consideration their types, the T/V parameter, variants of addressing a person by her name (full name, given name, nickname), forms mark-ing social position or status, jovial or offensive address forms which are in general currency, and the address form's position within the utterance (opening or closing position). Finally, I measured their proportions in the entire conversation, and iden-tified their functions in the construal of the interpersonal situation.

5. Results: address practices on Facebook

5.1. Address practices in personal Facebook-conversations

The first conversation I studied consists of a series of comments on a post an-nouncing a piece of good news on a Facebook user's personal profile, as well as reactions to those comments.

The conversation includes 105 comments in total, and begins with a post con-taining the user's photo. In the photo, she is handed over an award for her work at a ceremony, and the post is accompanied by the comment Köszi, Évi! 'Thanks, Eve!'. In terms of the link between the communicative situation and address forms, the post is quite peculiar, as even the comments do not make it clear who is the addressee of the vocative, what is her connection with the picture and the depicted event. However, since the photo is suitable for representative purposes, and the good news is shared with the public at large, including strangers, the post is clearly not directed only at the person called Eve but rather at a much wider audience.

Of the 105 comments, one gets repeated four times, thus the thread includes a total of 102 different turns. These include 46 separate congratulatory remarks, and 37 words of thanks from the author of the original post. Only a few reactions are left without an answer, and after the first reactions, she shares a comment expressing gratitude to additional people. The frequency of address forms is shown by the fact that the conversation includes 53 direct vocative expressions in total.

As an expressive, congratulation is an emotionally charged speech act, hence the vocatives co-occurring with it are elements adding a personal touch and ex-pressing emotions. Of the 56 separate comments, 3 express emotions in a visual rather than linguistic way, by emoticons and gifs. In one case, a vocative element featuring a possessive morpheme as well as a diminutive suffix (Gabikám) is ac-companied by a heart emoticon, and occurs as an independent expression of emotion, showing that a form of address may function by itself as an expressive speech act. Address forms also co-occur with congratulating remarks in an ad-ditional 14 cases, making up around one third of all utterances, which shows the

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4 As the group is public, the entire conversation is available on Facebook, but I have omitted full perso-nal names from the excerpts selected for analysis.

strong clustering between vocatives and expressives. Of these, 8 are simple nick-names derived from the given name (Gabi), one is a variant involving emphatic vow-el lengthening (Gabiiiii), one is a diminutive form (Gabika), one is a possessive form derived from the latter (Gabikám), two are common forms of address expressing affection (drága 'dear', drágám 'my dear'), and finally, one features the given name along with an affective form of address (Gabi, életem 'Gabi, my life'). In most of the utterances (12 instances), these vocatives appear in an utterance-final position (e.g. Gratulálok, Gabi! 'I congratulate you, Gabi!'). Interestingly, it is the devices with the highest emotional charge, namely the one with vowel lengthening and the one stacking address forms that occur utterance-initially. This distribution may support the hypothesis that congratulations are made more personal by closing vocatives, whereas address forms more strongly expressing emotions are often to be found in utterance-initial positions.

In some cases, the conversation moves beyond the adjacency pair constituted by a congratulating remark and an expression of thanks. In one such situation, the previous address by personal name is supplemented by a more intimate nominal form (Gabi, lelkem 'Gabi, my soul'). In two instances, tagging draws the poster's at-tention to the fact that the conversation is going on, with the author of the comment having something more to say.

In the poster's words of thanks, address forms have an even higher share, partly due to the user's individual style, her linguistic devices aimed at expressing person-ality and intimacy. In her 41 comments, 39 include vocative forms, as each congrat-ulating person is addressed individually. Of these vocatives emphasizing gratitude and enhancing the poster's personal tone, 14 involve attributes, and with one ex-ception these occur utterance-initially. In this group, 8 include the attribute kedves 'dear' and 6 contain drága 'dear' (Kedves Nelli, Drága Saci); in addition to given names and nicknames derived from them, some nouns also appear which signal an especially intimate relationship (tündérem 'my fairy', Nyicuska). Forms lacking an attribute also more frequently occur in an utterance-initial position than attached to congratulations. In the conversation under study, these are typically nouns with a posessive suffix (Erikám 'my Erika', életem 'my life) or nicknames derived from given names (Zsuzsó [< Zsuzsanna]). In three cases, the vocative is found utter-ancy-medially (Sok puszi, Kriszti, köszönöm szépen! 'Lots of kisses, Kriszti, thank you so much!'), and in 14 instances, it closes the utterance. Utterance-final voca-tives never include an attribute, and only one of them includes a possessive suffix. Typically, they are given names or nicknames derived from the latter, with one form foregrounding social role (tanár úr [a form used to address a male teacher]). These proportions also support the hypothesis that the utterance-initial position is strongly associated with the function of accentuating the expression of emotion.

In conversations conducted on personal profile pages, mostly among personal acquaintances, address forms are generally those which are also adopted in of-fline situations, with the choice between T and V also preserved. As a result, these conversations display the full inventory of informal address forms, and the variability of address characteristic of intimate/informal relationships is clearly manifested. However, as a function of the communicative situation (despite their personal na-

ture, the utterances can be seen by anyone, they are shared with the public), address forms do not simply serve to organize and construe relationships but also to represent them.

5.2. Address practices in public Facebook-conversations

The second conversation under study is made up of comments on a controversial post triggering a number of reactions in a popular Facebook group discussing stories from Budapest (W3).

The initial post already includes a vocative element addressing everybody and thereby encouraging participants to voice their opinions:

> Kirak egy roma srác egy posztot, amiben az elhunyt öccséről szeretne megtudni, amit lehet, és a sok intelligens mintapolgár a helyesírását és az öccse múltját használja fel arra, hogy hiteltelenítse. Ennek mi értelme van, emberek? (W3)
> [A Roma guy shares a post in which he is looking to find out as much as possible about his dead younger brother, and a lot of intelligent exemplary citizens use his spelling and the past of his brother to discredit him. What's the point of this, people?]

By 10 March 2018, the post had received 224 comments, of which 40 featured an addressee tag, thus allowing the conversation to be tracked, and 24 involved other address forms with a discourse organizing function. Most forms of address were given names or nicknames derived from the latter, with only a few instances of nominal forms of address that had an unmistakably offensive character.

The use of given names as vocative may have various functions in conversations. After a few initial comments, one of the core members of the group joins in. In the ensuing adjacency pair, the linguistic devices mirror each other, which suggests that the phatic function of communication has moved to the foreground, producing an effect of playfulness. Furthermore, the pattern also shows that the discourse partners already know each other in the world of social media:

> – Márk, hogy te mindenhol ott vagy…
> – Regina, hogy te sehol nem jelzed, hogy mindenhol ott vagyok… (W3)
>
> [– Mark, it's incredible that you are everywhere…
> – Regina, it's incredible that you never make a remark that I'm everywhere…]

The use of given names generally also serves to express attention and empathy toward the other person.

> – Ez a Pesten hallottam csoport. Mit vársz?
> Őszinte leszek, Dávid. Nem ezt. (W3)
>
> [–This is the I have heard this in Budapest group. What were you expecting?
> –I'll be honest with you, David. Not this.]

Nicknames derived from given names almost invariably carry an emotional charge. In this conversation, only one abbreviated name (Teo) occurs in a neutral situation, when a highly active core member is being addressed. On one occasion, the role of nicknames in reducing social distance becomes the subject of metapragmatic reflections. After mutual calls for the use of nicknames, the tone of the conversation becomes increasingly personal, pointing to the prospect of making personal acquaintance.

> –   Maradjunk a Szilvinél, kérlek. Köszönöm Igazad van… javítom J[
> Kedves Csaba   nem szükséges, de legközelebb inkább csak Szilvit írj
> Csabi   ha kérhetem
> (…)
> Csabi, csak egy privát jellegű kérdés. (W3)

> [– Let's stay with Szilvi, please. Thank you   You are right… I'm correcting it
> – Dear Csaba   it's not necessary but next time write only Szilvi
> – Csabi   if I may ask
> (…)
> – Csabi, only a private question this time.]

The conversation includes a strongly racist remark to which two different users reply vehemently, with offensive address forms (hülyegyerek 'stupid child', te szerencsétlen 'you miserable') in their fierce reactions. Another form of address (featuring a diminutive form of a given name) serves to close a highly offensive utterance, reinforcing the speaker's condescending style (Anyád tudja, hogy kutyát szült, Marcika? 'Does you mother know that she gave birth to a dog, Marcika?').

The comments made by an elderly woman, expressing objection in a moderate tone, include V forms (Tegye a szívére a kezét: ön szerint mi a hitelesebb? 'Put your hand on your heart: what is more authentic in your opinion?'). Even though she is addressing the younger male poster by his given name (Nézze, István 'Look, Steven'), in a context where T is ubiquitous, her choice of V sets strict boundaries and serves to increase distance in the construal of interpersonal relations. The author of the original post consistently uses the woman's full given name in his replies to her while avoiding linguistic devices that would unambiguously put the interaction into the T or the V category.

In conclusion, even one and the same conversation may display a variety of addressing situations and roles. Linguistic devices referring to the discourse partner construe and represent social relations in subtle, context-sensitive ways.

6. Summary

Due the prominence of interactivity and the importance of personality attached to shared contents, address forms in conversations on social media have crucial discourse organizing functions. In conversations emerging in the wake of personal or

community-related posts and news items, vocative forms occur in a high number. Even though variants of intimate/informal address forms generally predominate, the inventory of official address forms also contributes to the construal and representation of interpersonal relations. In the two conversations under study (personal congratulations, and group debate), T forms predominate. However, V variants do occur in both, thus the view that T is of general currency on the internet is not supported by the data. Besides addressing others by their names, users also employ vocatives expressing emotions, adapting to the nature of the conversation. In the congratulations, variants of jovial forms, and in the debate, offensive address forms are represented in a very broad spectrum. The rich variety of address forms on social media websites stands in contrast with the strategy of avoiding the use of address forms on the street, in everyday situations (Domonkosi 2017, 295), contributing to the creation of a personal tone in communication on social media platforms.

Resources

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