

Pronoun loss as a form of deflection

- I. **INTRODUCTION** A comparison of the development of address forms in Europe shows that the usage of the second person plural pronoun as a singular polite form was quite widespread (cf. Head 1978, Jucker & Taavitsainen 2003). Only in English and Dutch did this politeness strategy lead to the loss of the original second person singular (*thou* and *du* respectively). I argue that this loss occurred due to a specific interaction between social and grammatical factors. Following Brown & Gilman (1960) I refer to the informal pronoun with T (derived from French *tu*) and to the formal pronoun with V (derived from French *vous*).
- II. **SOCIAL FACTORS** Social factors in the loss of T are *markedness reversal* and *identity marking* (Dik 1997, Wales 1996). *Markedness reversal* refers to a change in T from a neutral to a negative address form. Wales (1996) relates this change to social mobility. Social mobility leads to insecurity about status and the result of this insecurity is that all addressees receive the polite pronoun except when the addressee clearly has a lower status. *Identity marking* states that the use of address forms reflects the social status of the speaker. Use of T was associated with a lower class or rural background. To avoid this association speakers avoided the T form. Both *markedness reversal* and *identity marking* explain part of the story, but they do not explain loss of T in all domains. Moreover *markedness reversal* and *identity marking* do not explain why T-loss is unique to English and Dutch.
- III. **FORMAL FACTOR** The loss of T is not only the loss of a pronoun but also the loss of a verbal ending. *Thou walkest* was replaced by *you walk*. I argue that the reason that English and Dutch lost their T form whereas most other European languages did not is due to economy in the verbal paradigm. In most European languages V combined with a suffix only found in the plural. Dutch and English V however combined with a finite form that was already found in the singular. Replacement of T by V yielded a simpler singular paradigm.
- IV. **CORPUS DATA** To support the hypothesis that the verbal ending plays a role in the loss of T, I compared all digitally available Dutch 13th and 16th century texts. I focus on three points:
 1. The subject versus non-subject proportion
 2. Lexical diffusion in reverse (cf. Trudgill 1998)
 3. The rise of a new construction:

du	valsche	wijf	gi	lieget
thou	evil	woman	you	lie

As expected T is first lost in subject position, the position where agreement is compulsory. In the few cases of 16th century Dutch where subject *du* is still available it mostly combines with the high frequent verbs *zijn* ‘to be’, *hebben* ‘to have’ or *zullen* ‘shall’. I relate the reversed lexical diffusion in combination with T to the discussion of word specific versus general paradigms (Pinker 1984). Children first acquire word specific verbal paradigms of high frequent verbs before they acquire general paradigms. In the case of the second person singular language learners no longer acquire a general paradigm. A third observation that supports the idea that the full loss of T is related to the verbal suffix it combines with is the rise of a new construction as presented under (3). In this construction the T vocative *du* is combined with a V subject. There is no good pragmatic explanation for this sudden switch, but there is a clear formal explanation: agreement with T is not necessary.

Bibliography

- Brown, Roger & Albert Gilman (1960).** The pronouns of power and solidarity. In: Thomas Sebeok (red.), *Style in language*. Cambridge: MIT-press, 252-275.
- Dik, Simon (1997).** *The theory of functional grammar. Second revised edition part 1. Structure of the clause*. Kees Hengeveld (red). Berlijn, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Head, Brian F. (1978).** Respect degrees in pronominal reference. In: Joseph H. Greenberg (red.), *Universals of human language*. Standford (Ca.): Stanford University Press, 151-211.
- Pinker, Steven (1984).** *Language Learnability and Language Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Taavitsainen, Irma & Andreas H. Jucker (2003).** *Diachronic perspectives on address term systems*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins (= Pragmatics and Beyond. New series 107).
- Vermaas, Hanny (2002).** *Veranderingen in de Nederlandse aanspreekvormen van de dertiende t/m de twintigste eeuw*. Utrecht: LOT dissertation series.
- Wales, Katie (1996).** *Personal pronouns in present-day English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.