



ADDRESS PRONOUNS IN A DIASYSTEMATIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Our paper concerns different strategies of communication with respect to formality and politeness, and how these differences relate to the diasystematic dimensions. Our contrastive approach involves forms of address in French and Italian compared to Danish, German, and English norms and usage. Both Romance and Germanic languages have two systems of address pronouns with different levels of formality. There are, however, significant differences in usages in the respective languages, both typological and interlinguistic. Different language areas have different conventions for communication and politeness, and we believe that address forms reflect such socio-cultural differences. Our analyses of these differences are anchored in the diasystematic dimensions as proposed by Eugenio Coseriu, with special focus on the diaphasic variation and its intertwinement with diastratically conditioned factors.

Keywords: Address pronouns, French, Italian, English, German, Danish, diasystematic dimensions, diacultural variation

1. Introduction

Our paper concerns different strategies of communication with respect to formality and politeness, and how these differences relate to the diasystematic dimensions. Our contrastive approach involves forms of address pronouns in French and Italian compared to Danish, German, and English norms and usage.

Both Romance and Germanic languages¹ have two systems of address pronouns with different levels of formality (Schøsler and Strudsholm 2013). There are, however, significant differences in usage in the respective languages, both typological and interlinguistic. Different language areas have different conventions for communication and politeness, and we believe that address forms reflect such socio-cultural differences (Durst-Andersen 2011, Hofstede 2001, Kragh et al. 2016). There is, nonetheless, a general need for expressing politeness rooted in social distance, which is often related to power. This need is indeed reflected in the pronominal systems in certain languages. The languages presented here have certain features in common, but they have, however, developed in different ways. How can that be? It seems that linguistic politeness is determined by specific conventions in a given society. Can we set up a cultural barometer?

Our analyses of the differences are anchored in the diasystematic dimensions as proposed by Eugenio Coseriu (Völker 2009), with special focus on the diaphasic variation and its intertwinement with diastratically conditioned factors, where the power dimension plays a relevant role.² With respect to these two dimensions, we distinguish between *formality* as diaphasically dependent on the situation, and *politeness* and *power* as diastratic issues indicating the distance between speaker and listener.³ In this study, we aim, however, to go a step further. We propose to test the applicability of the diasystem when working across language borders. We assume that the interlinguistic approach poses new challenges which the diasystem with the above-mentioned parameters does not take into account. We propose to include the Hofstede model, with its cultural dimensions, by referring to Perkins (1992), who analyses the relation between cultural-bound and linguistic properties by considering a dialogue, which indeed

¹ By Romance languages, we refer exclusively to French and Italian, and we do not take any other Romance languages into consideration. By Germanic languages, we refer exclusively to English, German, and Danish. Of these, only modern German and Danish have two systems. We no longer find the formal variant in modern English.

² These two dimensions also relate to the diatopic dimension, which concerns the geographic variation.

³ We distinguish between social distance and power as two different parameters. Social distance identifies reciprocal relations (horizontally) and power identifies non-reciprocal relations (vertically).

implies the use of address pronouns, as a culture-bound situation (see also Kragh and Strudsholm 2015).

2. Diasystematic frame

With respect to the diasystem and its parameters of variation, we refer to the extended version as presented by Gadet (2007/2003):

	Variationistic dimension	Type of variation	Diasystematic level
Interpersonal variation	Time	Language change	Diachronic
	Location	Geographic, regional, local, spatial	Diatopic
	Society, culture	Social	Diastratic
Intrapersonal variation	Style, level, register	Situational, stylistic, functional	Diaphasic
	Medium	Oral, written	Diamesic

Table 1: Diasystematic parameters of variation, interpretation by Gadet, reproduced by Kragh and Lindschouw (2013:8).

As long as we take the intralinguistic approach, language by language, we are able to account for both system and usage. As regards usage, we refer to the diasystem. According to Berruto (1987), each language has its own diasystem and as long as we study one single language, this approach is ideal. However, when comparing usages across languages, i.e. an interlinguistic approach, new factors arise with the consequence that the diasystematic dimensions do not fulfil the requirements.

3. Address forms in the pronominal systems

In general, in a communication situation, there is a speaker and an addressee. Typically, the speaker refers to him or herself by first person singular *I/ich/jeg/je* and *io*, and to the listener by second person singular *you/du/du/tu* or *tu*. If the speaker speaks not only for himself but also on behalf of others, he uses first person plural *we/wir/vi/nous* or *noi* and if the listener is more than one person, he uses second person plural *you/ihr/I/vous* or *voi*. This usage represents the grammatical paradigm illustrated in Table 2, but varies according to the communication situation.

		English	German	Danish	French	Italian
Singular	First person	<i>I</i>	<i>ich</i>	<i>jeg</i>	<i>je</i>	<i>io</i>
	Second person	<i>you</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>tu</i>	<i>tu</i>
	Third person	<i>he/she</i>	<i>er/sie</i>	<i>han/hun</i>	<i>il/elle</i>	<i>lui/lei</i>
Plural	First person	<i>we</i>	<i>wir</i>	<i>vi</i>	<i>nous</i>	<i>noi</i>
	Second person	<i>you</i>	<i>ihr</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>vous</i>	<i>voi</i>
	Third person	<i>they</i>	<i>sie</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>ils/elles</i>	<i>loro</i>

Table 2: Overview of personal subject pronouns.

Specific circumstances can trigger alternative uses of the system; for instance, in formal situations. Both Germanic and Romance languages offer specific forms which may be considered as obligatory in situations with social distance between the speaker and the listener (*courtesy*), in contrast to informal situations characterized by *trust*. This kind of variation concerns both the diaphasic, the diastratic, and the diatopic dimensions. Moreover, the inventory of formal pronoun forms varies across languages.

3.1. English

Standard modern English has only one set of address pronouns with *you* in both singular and plural forms of second person, and in both formal and informal contexts:

	forms of trust	forms of courtesy ⁴
singular	<i>you</i>	<i>you</i> <i>thou</i> (archaic use)
plural	<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>

Table 3: Address pronouns in English.

Up until the eighteenth century, the English formal deferential singular form *thou* was commonly used.⁵ This form is now largely archaic, and in modern English, there is no longer a specific formal form of the address

⁴ We consider the terms *courtesy* and *politeness* as synonyms, but in this study, we use *courtesy* to describe the linguistic forms, and *politeness* to describe the sociocultural context.

⁵ In Shakespeare's time *thou* was used for the singular and *you* for the plural. Furthermore, *you* also denoted formality and respect, whereas *thou* was informal and intimate (Cable 2002:111).

pronoun; in most contexts *you* is used, irrespective of the level of formality. However, the old formal form *thou* is still used in various dialects, primarily in Northern parts of England as well as in formal religious contexts (Evans 1969, Head 1978:160):

- (1) *You think that's wrong?*
- (2) *Did Jesus Christ ever say **thou** shalt not smoke?* (Bill Heine radio phone, 185-1994, BNC)

3.2. German

Modern German has, in contrast to English, a bipartite system of address pronouns:

	forms of trust	forms of courtesy
singular	<i>du</i>	<i>Sie</i>
plural	<i>ihr</i>	<i>Sie</i>

Table 4: Address pronouns in German.

The forms of courtesy are identical to the third person plural form, *sie*, which again is identical to the third person singular feminine form. Different from the third person usage, the address forms have a capital letter.

In a historical perspective, in the Middle Ages, second plural form *Ihr* was used as an address pronoun to a person who was higher in rank. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the inventory of the formal address pronouns is extended by the third person singular forms in masculine *Er* and feminine *Sie*. The modern use of *Sie* – used when addressing both male and female persons in both singular and plural – does not appear until the end of the seventeenth century (Besch 2008).

In spite of tendencies in Germany to increased informalization (cf. for example Besch 2008:2599-2600), the distinction between informal and formal addressing is still highly reflected in modern German society, where *du* is standard only in family-related and other intimate contexts. In most other contexts, *Sie* is the standard form, at least until closer relationship between the speaker and addressee is established (Hickey 2003), illustrated in these two examples:

- (3) *Sie erhalten mit dieser E-Mail die Daten zu Ihrem Auftrag, den Sie soeben auf unserer Webseite getätigt haben*
 ‘With this e-mail **you** will receive the data for the order **you** have just placed on our website’.
- (4) *Kommst du jetzt, Peter?*
 ‘Are **you** coming, Peter?’

3.3 Danish

Like German, Danish has a bipartite system of address pronouns with *du* and *I* as forms of trust and third plural *De* as a form of courtesy, both in singular and in plural.

	forms of trust	forms of courtesy
singular	<i>du</i>	<i>De</i>
plural	<i>I</i>	<i>De</i>

Table 5: Address pronouns in Danish.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, third plural *De* displaced third singular *han* and *hun*, and second plural *I* as polite address pronouns, most likely under the influence of the German *Sie* (Dahlerup 1993/1919-1956). The use of the second plural pronoun *I* as a marker of courtesy dates back to the thirteenth century (Lundeby 1995). Around 1970, the informal *du* almost completely replaced the formal *De* (Lundeby 1995), especially in oral contexts. In formal written language, the polite forms are still used, just as there are special rules in the Danish parliament and in connection with inquiries to royalties (Trap-Jensen 1995). In modern Danish we notice a tendency to use second person singular *du*, instead of second person plural *I*, in collective messages and enquiries, in all probability under the influence of English. In a recent study on address forms and politeness, Bjørn Andersen (2015) concludes that especially among younger people, the use of the polite *De* is on its way back.

- (5) *Nu kan du* igen bestille tid til PCR-test
 ‘Now **you** can make an appointment for a PCR test again’
- (6) *De bedes venligst* bekræfte **Deres** accept af bestemmelserne i bilaget
 ‘**You** are kindly asked to confirm **your** acceptance of the provisions of the annex’

3.4. French

French has, parallel to German and Danish, two sets of address pronouns: an informal and a formal set.

The second person singular form *tu* is used in informal situations when the addressee is a single person. This use corresponds to the second person plural form, *vous*, which is used in informal contexts when there is more than one addressee. The plural form, *vous*, can, however, also designate one single addressee. In such cases, the subject complement (adjectives or participles) relating to the addressee agree with this in gender and number (see also Gaglia 2022:103-104).

- (7) *Vous êtes mort ou quoi ? dit une voix à l'extérieur*
'Are you dead or what? Says a voice from outside' (Benoziglio, 1980, Frantext)
- (8) *Vous êtes rentrée, tout échauffée d'avoir couru, la sueur au front, les boucles défaites et la goutte au nez*
'You have returned, totally exhausted from having run, sweat in your front head, the curly hair in a mess and a drop from the nose' (Chandernagor, 1981, Frantext)

	forms of trust	forms of courtesy
singular	<i>tu</i>	<i>vous</i>
plural	<i>vous</i>	<i>vous</i>

Table 6: Address pronouns in French.

This use of the second person plural form, instead of the singular form, is called *vouvoiement*, in contrast to *tutoiement*, which is the term signalling the use of the second person singular form. The polite use of *vous* (*vouvoiement*) is often referred to as a corollary of the royal plural *nous* which goes back to the era of the Roman emperors who used *NOS* when talking of themselves (Molinelli 2018). However, the *vouvoiement* is already used in Latin by Ovide. In Old French, it seems that *tu* and *vous* were used arbitrarily without fixed rules. They could even appear in the same text passages alternating with each other. Under the influence of the court, the polite form prevailed in the seventeenth century, and during the

Ancien Régime, so-called ‘honest people’⁶ would not use *tu* with each other but only when addressing an ordinary person (Grevisse and Goosse 2008:837).

In modern French, the *vouvoiement* marks a certain distance and is used in particular between people who do not know each other or to a person to whom the speaker owes respect. In spite of these standard rules, there is also a certain amount of diatopic, diastratic, and diachronic variation. In certain contexts, for instance in specific companies in the twentieth century, the *tutoiement* could be forbidden along with swearing and quarrelling. Conversely, some poets would, particularly in the nineteenth century, address God or a royal by *tu*. Conventionally, it is the older or most prestigious part who initiates the change from *vous* to *tu*. Although there is a tendency, also in France, to be more informal, there is still a rather conservative usage (Armstrong and Pooley 2010). The polite form *s’il vous plaît* is fixed and used in both formal and informal situations.

3.5. Italian

Like German, Danish, and French modern Italian has a bipartite system of address pronouns:

	forms of trust	forms of courtesy
singular	<i>tu</i>	<i>Lei/lei</i> <i>Ella</i> (solemn) <i>voi</i> (regional)
plural	<i>voi</i>	<i>voi</i> <i>Loro</i> (very formal)

Table 7: Address pronouns in Italian.

Second singular *tu* is used as a confidential form when addressing people who know each other well:

- (9) *E adesso sanno che anche tu sei qui* (CORIS)
 ‘And now they know that **you** are here too’

Third singular *lei* is used as the form of courtesy, when addressing people of respect or with whom you are not particularly familiar:

⁶ ‘*Les honnêtes gens*’ is considered as the intellectual elite.

- (10) *Lei è stato molto gentile* (CORIS)
'You have been very kind'

There are two other less common forms of address pronouns, *voi* and *Ella*. Second plural *voi* used for referring to a single person was quite common until a few decades ago. The use of *voi* as a courtesy address pronoun was widespread until the nineteenth century, then faded and was gradually replaced by *lei*. After a useless attempt to impose it during the fascist era, *voi* is today mainly used as a regional variety in Southern Italy (Bresin 2021:122 ff.), but it is also typical of commercial correspondence and, as an alternative to *tu*, in advertising, in recipes and the like, and is also found in translations from French (*vous*) or English (*you*).

- (11) *Chiunque può sapere che voi siete collegato al sistema* (CORIS)
'Anyone can know that **you** are connected to the system'

Like in French, there is a logical concordance between the referent and the subject complement, but no grammatical concordance (see also Gaglia 2022:135).

Third person singular feminine *Ella*, with reference to a single person, man or woman, is the form of utmost respect, is limited to highly formal or bureaucratic uses, and is usually written with a capital letter:

- (12) *Ella è qui, signor Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, presidente della Repubblica per volere divino* (CORIS)
'You are here, Mr. Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, president of the Republic by divine will'

In plural, the common address pronoun is second plural *voi*, both as a confidential form and as a form of respect:

- (13) *Perché voi siete tutti qui e avete l'autorità per prendere le decisioni del caso* (CORIS)
'Because you are all here and you have the authority to make the appropriate decisions'

As a more formal variant, *loro* can be used:

- (14) *Nel rinnovare **Loro** i sensi della mia stima, rimango a disposizione per ogni eventuale chiarimento in merito all'elaborato di cui sopra* (CORIS)
'In renewing to **you** the assurances of my esteem, I remain at your disposal for any possible clarification of the abovementioned work'
- (15) *Cerchiamo i cappelli!*". "**Lor** signori?", disse. "Ma sono lì, signori, i cappelli!" (CORIS)
"Let's look for the hats!" "Gentlemen?", he said. "But there they are, gentlemen, the hats!"

The verb must agree with the address pronoun used: second person singular when using the *tu*, third singular when using *lei* or *Ella*, second plural when using *voi*, and third plural when using *Loro*.

On the other hand, there is an oscillation as regards the concords of adjectives or participles: in the most formal and refined use they go to the feminine, but commonly the concords are made following the interlocutor's sex.

- (16) *Ed **Ella** è, signor professore, così saviamente **modesto** da non pretendere ch'io la reputi tale* (CORIS)
'And you, Mr. Professor, are so wisely modest that you do not expect me to consider you as such'

In formal letters, when you want to express deference, the address pronouns of respect and the other pronouns referring to the interlocutor are written with a capital initial. Already in the third century, Latin *VOS* was used when addressing higher-ranking persons. This usage is, e.g., found in the fourteenth century, in Dante, who used *voi* when addressing persons whom he would show respect. *Voi* was used by subjects who address their Lords and among equals belonging to the higher strata. Formerly it was not unusual to find examples of the wife saying *voi* to the husband, and until the 1900s, children said *voi* to their parents (Rohlf's 1968:181-183). The use of third singular feminine goes back to the fifteenth century, probably

influenced by Spanish, with reference to *vostra eccellenza* ‘your excellency’ or *vostra signoria* ‘your lordship’.

- (17) *Le restituiamo il manoscritto, ringraziando La comunque della Sua fiducia* (CORIS)
 ‘We return the manuscript to you; however, we thank you for your trust’
- (18) *La S.V. è invitata al talk show che avrà luogo questa sera alle ore 23.00 presso gli studi di Tele-Arcadia.* (CORIS)
 ‘Your Lordship is invited to the talk show that will take place this evening at 11.00 pm at the Tele-Arcadia studios.’

The polite address pronoun *Lei* is generally used with strangers; likewise, it is the norm to use the formal pronouns, ‘*dare del Lei*’ to persons in positions of authority (e.g. the student to the teacher) or to persons of a greater age. In Italian, there is a difference in whether you speak or write together. Persons who normally use the informal pronouns in an oral context will often use the formal set when they write to each other (Bates and Benigni 1975).

3.6. Summary in a typological and interlinguistic perspective

		Singular	Plural
English	trust	<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>
	courtesy	<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>
German	trust	<i>du</i>	<i>Ihr</i>
	courtesy	<i>Sie</i> (=third person plural)	<i>Sie</i> (third person plural)
Danish	trust	<i>du</i>	<i>I</i>
	courtesy	<i>De</i> (third person plural)	<i>De</i> (third person plural)
French	trust	<i>tu</i>	<i>vous</i>
	courtesy	<i>vous</i> (second person plural)	<i>vous</i> (second person plural)
Italian	trust	<i>tu</i>	<i>voi</i>
	courtesy	<i>Lei/lei</i> (third person fem. singular)	<i>Loro</i> (third person plural)

Table 8: Address pronouns in Germanic and Romance languages.

We can conclude that there are interlinguistic differences in the systems, which are rooted in the typological differences between Romance and

Germanic languages. As regards the Romance languages, Gaglia (2022:15-16) distinguishes between four different types:

- I. *Zweigliedriges System mit Numerus-Kontrast*
- II. *Zweigliedriges System mit Person-Kontrast*
- III. *Zweigliedriges System mit Person- und Genus-Kontrast*
- IV. *Dreigliedriges System mit Numerus- und Person-Kontrast*

Modern French, with the *tu-vous* distinction, belongs to type I, and modern standard Italian, with the *tu-lei* distinction, belongs to type III. As illustrated above, some Southern Italian dialects belong to type I.

As regards the Germanic languages, these do not fit into Gaglia's classification. As seen in Table 8, German and Danish have contrasts regarding both number and person (*du/du* (second person singular) vs. *Sie/De* (third person plural)). Therefore, German and Danish would require adding a fifth type called *Zweigliedriges System mit Numerus- und Person-Kontrast*. English has no contrast at all. Thus, we find a clear typological difference between Romance and Germanic languages.

From here, we proceed with the intercultural differences.

4. Politeness and power – hierarchical structure

The research on politeness is extremely extensive, and there is no consensus about how to define the phenomenon of politeness. Leech describes politeness as 'communicative altruism' (2014:7 ff.), i.e. a behaviour in which two or more persons in a communicative community exhibit a form of non-wilful generosity towards each other.

Politeness is first and foremost a pragmatic phenomenon. It can be manifested in linguistic behaviour, in non-linguistic behaviour, or in a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour. An example of non-linguistic politeness could be holding the door for someone else; if one simultaneously says please or let me ..., it is a polite act involving both linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour. Empirically, it is open to question whether politeness can be expressed solely by linguistic means, but an example that comes close could be to say thank you to the person holding the door for one.

According to Leech (2014), we can distinguish between two main approaches to politeness. Firstly, a sociopragmatic approach with the sociological aspects of politeness in focus; that is, under which circumstances and according to which cultural conventions the politeness

is unfolding. Leech (2014: 5) expresses it in the following way: “there is often a sense of what is normal, recognized by members of society, as to how polite to be for a particular occasion”.⁷ If one hopes to succeed with politeness, it is therefore important to hit the most appropriate way of expressing politeness. Secondly, a pragmalinguistic approach focuses on how politeness is linguistically manifested (Leech 2014:ix, 13-18). These two approaches are not always easy to keep apart, and although our main interest is in the latter, both approaches play a role in our study.

One of the most influential theories on polite linguistic behaviour has been put forward by Brown and Levinson (1987/1978). We are, however, more inspired by another line of thought involved in various studies on politeness, namely, one presented by Brown and Gilman (1960)⁸ about the so-called *T/V*-distinction: the choice between *tu* and *vous* in French and the principles guiding this choice. Following Brown and Gilman, this choice was regulated by two relations – power and solidarity – and these two concepts each correspond to two of the diasystematic dimensions: the diastratic and the diaphasic dimensions. The speaker will, in each individual situation, estimate the hierarchical relation (power) and how close the relation is (solidarity).

According to Brown and Gilman (1960), an estimation of where the two interlocutors are placed with respect to the dimensions in the figure, in relation to each other in a concrete communication, is always included in the choice between *tu* or *vous*.

This is closely related to the fact that polite behaviour is not absolute, but relative; polite behaviour is always culture-bound and situation-bound. What is considered polite behaviour differs from culture to culture. In certain cultures, lack of eye-contact is considered a lack of respect and therefore impolite. In other cultures, looking people in the eyes when talking to them is, on the contrary, considered disrespectful because it signals that the person assumes equality, and it is seen as impolite for such a status to be granted in advance.

⁷ See Oliveira (2006) for a discussion of conventionalised versus negotiated usage.

⁸ We are aware that the address model of Brown and Gilman (1960) is not of recent date and has been subject to criticism. Especially their exclusively binary approach to address pronouns has been questioned since it does not take into account that several languages have “more intricate systems of address” (King 2010:232), cf. also Gaglia (2022), who operates with a tripart system of pronouns, as well.

Cultural differences are also linguistically manifested. This is illustrated by Mosegaard Hansen (1998:25), who states that the use of the modal verb *kunne* in Danish and *pouvoir* in French cannot be considered equally polite, even if those two words mean almost the same thing. There is a difference with respect to politeness between the Danish *kan/kunne du godt skrive det her for mig* and the French *tu peux/pourrais me taper ce texte?* Although the words are almost the same, the Danish version is, according to Mosegaard Hansen (1998), less polite than the French one.

Thus, one cannot claim that one culture is more polite than the other. What is considered polite behaviour varies from culture to culture (e.g., Mosegaard Hansen 1998).

Let us now look at how Hofstede's model can account for this.

5. The Hofstede model

In Hofstede's model, countries are classified according to a list of cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence, of which power distance is particularly relevant for our study (Hofstede 2011, Kragh and Strudsholm 2018).⁹ Power distance concerns the unequal distribution of power in a society and the extent to which the population accepts this hierarchical order.

As regards the five other dimensions, individualism concerns people's self-image and the degree of interdependence. Countries can be considered more or less individualist or more or less collectivist. Masculinity is about competition, achievement, and success. A low score (feminine) indicates that the dominant values in society involve care and quality of life. Uncertainty avoidance deals with the fact that the future cannot be known and looks at how different cultures deal with this uncertainty. A low score indicates that a society accepts lack of knowledge about the future, and a high score means that a society is not comfortable with ambiguous situations. Long-term orientation links a society with its

⁹ We wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for pointing to the fact that "Hofstede's model is based on a study conducted in the 1980s with mid-managers at IBM locations around the world. It was designed within the area of business studies rather than cultural studies. Although broadly adopted in business studies, it has also received wide criticism [...] by cultural theorists." Moreover, the model is criticised for its Eurocentric bias. These limitations are of course taken into account in our testing of the model and will be further discussed in section 6.

own past and a respect for tradition. Countries that score high on this dimension take a pragmatic approach and encourage prudence, whereas those with a low score prefer to maintain traditions and norms. Indulgence concerns the degree to which people try to control their desires and impulses. Scoring high on indulgence indicates that the population is impulsive, enjoys life, and encourages “thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future” (<https://www.hofstede-insights.com>), in contrast to more restrained cultures which are more controlled and morally disciplined.

In the following, we illustrate the differences between the UK, Germany, Denmark, France, and Italy with respect to the six dimensions included in Hofstede’s model.¹⁰ All statements about the specific cultures should be taken with caution, as they are based on generalisations and often reflect stereotypes, which is of course a major weakness of the model.

5.1. Power distance

Denmark is in the very low end, whereas France with a score of 68 is placed fairly high. Just below France we find Italy with a score of 50 and closest to Denmark are England and Germany, both with 35 on the power distance scale.

In France, children are raised to be emotionally dependent on their parents and, later on, on their teachers and superiors. Power is generally placed in Paris or in other big cities and is centralised in companies and government where the hierarchical system has several levels. Powerful people have often attended “les grandes écoles” – the most prestigious educational institutions in France.

¹⁰ All quantitative data reproduced in the tables, as well as the rather generalised statements about the different cultures, are from <https://www.hofstede-insights.com>, retrieved November 2021. The scores presented in our study all concern countries whose scores are considered valid, cf. ““Only validated scores” gives you the “official” country scores from studies that we consider valid.” (<https://geerthofstede.com/hofstedes-globe/>).

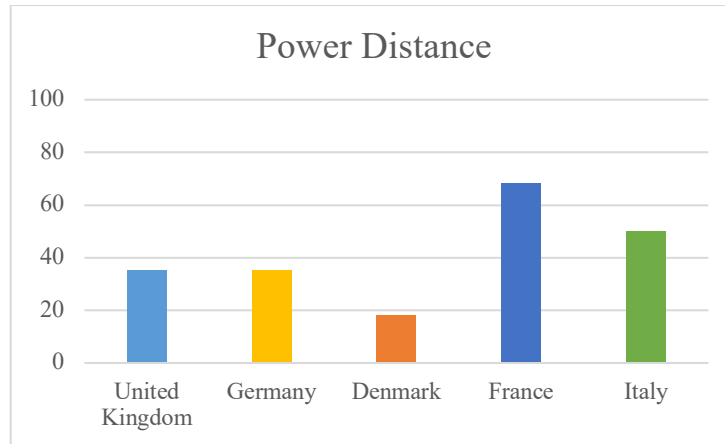


Figure 1: Power Distance score according to Hofstede.

According to the model, Italy is between France on the one side, and UK and Germany on the other side. On the one hand, Italy tends to prefer equality and a decentralisation of power and decision-making, based on teamwork and an open management style like the UK and Germany; on the other hand, Italy also resembles France by maintaining, to some extent, the power distance. This intermediate position may reflect regional differences in Italy.

Denmark's position at the lowest end of the scale illustrates its reputation for having a flat hierarchical structure; power is decentralised; Danes do not lead, they coach, and employees have a high degree of autonomy. In contrast to the French people, Danes believe in independence and equal rights and prefer, in general, an informal atmosphere based on direct and inclusive communication. Germans, as well, have a strong tradition of a direct and participatory communication and meeting style and of respecting co-determination rights. Germany is supported by a strong middle class and Germans expect expertise from their leader(s).

5.2. Individualism

On the individualism scale, all the studied countries are placed rather high. The UK has the highest score (89), closely followed by Germany with 76, Denmark, with a score of 74, France with 71, and Italy with 67.

Being an individualist society means that there is a preference for loosely-knit social frameworks.

In the UK, the route to happiness is through personal fulfilment, and children are taught from an early age to find their own unique purpose in life. People take care of themselves and their immediate family.

Germans also tend to focus on a strong family life limited to the closest family members. They prefer direct and honest communication, also when it hurts, and in German society, loyalty comes with duty and responsibility, which goes hand-in-hand with a strong belief in self-actualisation.

In Denmark as well, people are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only.

In France, people are supposed to take care of themselves and their nearest family. The complexity of having this individualist culture, together with the high score on power distance, is manifested in, for instance, the emotionally strong family ties which also imply a stronger respect for the elderly. In addition, the French people normally pay formal respect to their boss, due to the high degree of power distance, but may at the same time do the opposite behind his or her back. In France, there is a rather clear distinction between family life and work life, and the French people respect, in general, the central government as an impersonal power centre which cannot so easily invade their private lives.

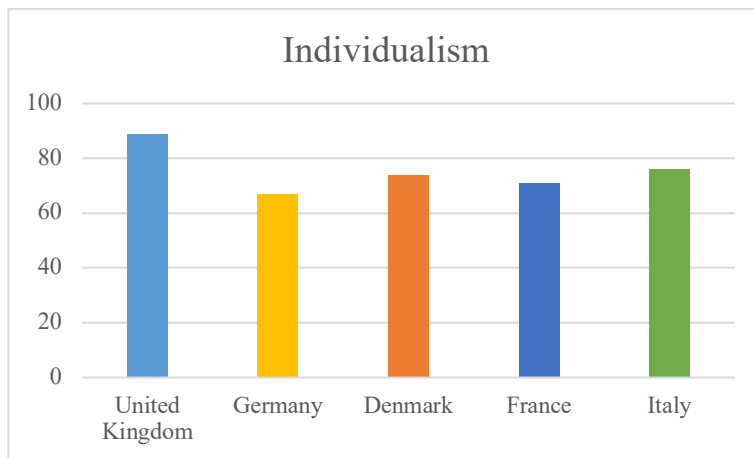


Figure 2: Individualism score according to Hofstede.

With the highest score, Italy is a real individualist culture – in particular in Northern Italy, less-so in the South. Italians are motivated by their own personal objectives in life. Family and friends are important for their social life, yet, they are good at using their professional friends for introducing them to important and powerful people who are good to know. This seems, however, also to be more widespread in the North than in the South.

5.3. Masculinity

With scores of 70 and 66, respectively, Italy, the UK, and Germany are true masculine societies, highly success-oriented. In contrast, particularly Denmark, with a score of 16 – but also, to a certain extent, France, with 43 points on the masculinity scale – are considered feminine societies.

In France, this is manifested by an extensive welfare system (*sécurité sociale*) with benefits including a 35-hour work week and a strong focus on the quality of life. Whereas these benefits make a feminine culture in the upper class, the working class in France is more masculine. Italy, on the other hand, is an entirely masculine society. The culture is very competitive and status symbols are important for signalling success.

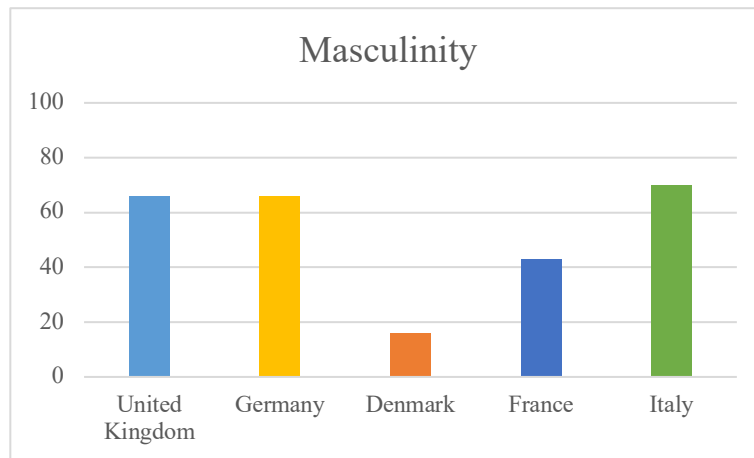


Figure 3: Masculinity score according to Hofstede.

Denmark is diametrically opposed to Italy with its strong focus on inclusion, consensus, and solidarity, which are all considered feminine features. Work-life balance is important and free time is often prioritised over high salaries.

In spite of their close geographical relation, Germany is far from Denmark. Germany is strongly masculine with a clear focus on performance and status.

5.4. Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is low in Denmark (23) and Britain (35), rather high in Germany (65), and high in Italy (75) and France (86).

Denmark's and the UK's low score in this area means that Brits and Danes do not need a lot of structure and predictability in their work life. Plans can change overnight; new things pop up and the Brits and Danes are generally fine with it. Curiosity is natural and is encouraged from a very young age. This combination of a highly individualist and curious nation is also the driving force for Denmark's reputation within innovation and design. This also emerges throughout the society in both its humour, heavy consumerism for new and innovative products, and the highly creative industries it thrives in – advertising, marketing, financial engineering. At the workplace, the low score on uncertainty avoidance is also reflected in the fact that the Danes tell you if they are in doubt or do not know something. Danes are comfortable in ambiguous situations in the workplace.

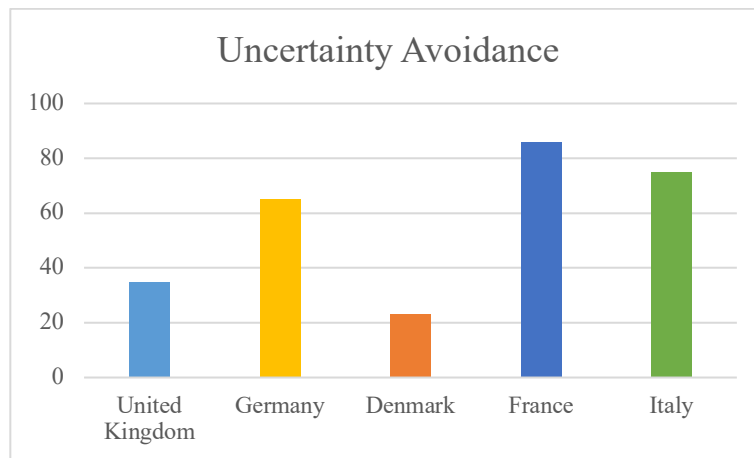


Figure 4: Uncertainty Avoidance score according to Hofstede.

With its score in the high end, Germany has a slight preference for uncertainty avoidance. In line with the philosophical heritage of Kant, Hegel, and Fichte, there is a strong preference for deductive rather than inductive approaches, be it in thinking, presenting, or planning: the systematic overview has to be given in order to proceed. In combination with their low power distance, where the certainty for making one's own decisions is not covered by the larger responsibility of the boss, Germans prefer to compensate for their higher uncertainty by strongly relying on expertise.

Italy's high score on uncertainty avoidance means that, as a nation, Italians are not comfortable in ambiguous situations. Formality in Italian society is important, and the Italian penal and civil code are complicated, rife with clauses, codicils, etc. What is surprising for the foreigner is the apparent contradiction between all the existing norms and procedures and the fact that Italians do not always comply with them. But in a bureaucratic country, one learns very soon who is important, and who is not, in order to more effectively navigate through the bureaucracy. In work terms, high uncertainty avoidance results in large amounts of detailed planning. The low uncertainty avoidance approach (where the planning process can be flexible within a changing environment) can be very stressful for Italians. The combination of high masculinity and high uncertainty avoidance makes life very difficult and stressful. To release some of the tension that is built up during the day, Italians need to have relaxing moments in their everyday life, enjoying a long meal or frequent coffee breaks.

French culture's high score in uncertainty avoidance is evident in the following: the French don't like surprises. Structure and planning are required. Before meetings and negotiations, they like to receive all necessary information. Consequently, the French are good at developing complex technologies and systems in a stable environment, such as in the case of nuclear power plants, rapid trains, and the aviation industry. There is also a need for emotional safety valves, as a high score on uncertainty avoidance and the combination of high power distance and high individualism strengthen each other, so to speak. There is a strong need for laws, rules, and regulations to structure life. This, however, does not mean that most Frenchmen will try to follow all these rules, as is also the case in other Latin countries. Given the high score on power distance, which means that power-holders have privileges, power-holders do not necessarily feel

obliged to follow all those rules that are meant to control the people in the street. At the same time, commoners try to relate to power-holders so that they can also claim the exception to the rule.

5.5. Long-term orientation

Long-term orientation is low in Denmark (35), medium in the UK (51), medium-high in Italy (61) and France (63), and high in Germany (83).

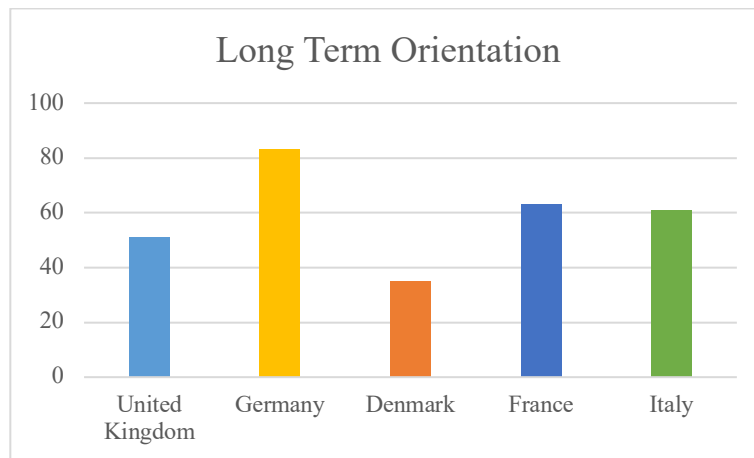


Figure 5: Long-Term Orientation score according to Hofstede.

A low score of 35 indicates that Danish culture – and, to a certain degree, British – is normative. People in such societies have a strong concern with establishing the absolute truth; they are normative in their thinking. They exhibit great respect for traditions, a relatively small propensity to save for the future, and a focus on achieving quick results. High scores in this area show that French and Italian cultures are pragmatic; Germany's high score indicates that it is a pragmatic country as well. In societies with a pragmatic orientation, people believe that truth depends very much on the situation, context, and time. They show an ability to adapt their traditions easily to changed conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness, and perseverance in achieving results.

5.6. Indulgence

Indulgence is high in Denmark (70) and the UK (69), in contrast to France (48), Germany (40), and Italy (30), of which Italy is the lowest.

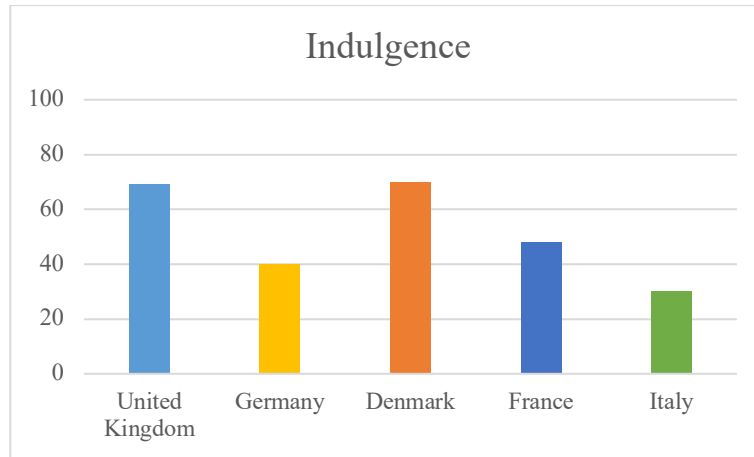


Figure 6: Indulgence score according to Hofstede.

Denmark's and the UK's high score in this area means that these two are indulgent countries. People in societies classified by a high score in indulgence generally exhibit a willingness to realise their impulses and desires with regard to enjoying life and having fun. They possess a positive attitude and tend to be optimistic. In addition, they consider leisure-time important, act as they please, and spend money as they wish. France scores somewhat in the middle, as regards indulgence versus restraint. This, in combination with a high score on uncertainty avoidance, implies that the French people are less relaxed and enjoy life less often than is commonly assumed. The low scores in this area indicate that the German and Italian cultures are restrained in nature. Societies with a low score in this dimension have a tendency to cynicism and pessimism. Also, in contrast to indulgent societies, restrained societies do not put much emphasis on leisure-time and control the gratification of their desires. People with this orientation have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms and feel that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong.

5.7. Summary in an intercultural perspective

The overall impression is that Denmark in all dimensions stands out from the four other countries, with individualism as the only exception.

We have raised the question if cultural dimensions are relevant for explaining cross-national differences in the use of address pronouns in European cultures. Taking our point of departure in Hofstede's model of

cultural dimensions, we assume that the culture-specific way people deal with authority is an important factor in explaining cross-national differences in the use of address pronouns. Among Hofstede's cultural dimensions, power distance concerning the acceptance of unequal distribution of power is particularly relevant for our analysis. Power distance concerns the unequal distribution of power in a society and the extent to which the population accepts this hierarchical order. In high power-distance countries, professors, for instance, are highly respected by the students, while in low power-distance countries, professors and students are almost hierarchically equal. In the interpretation of Hofstede's model, suggested by Verma et al. (2016), the Nordic countries belong to the low power-distance societies, while Latin countries (France and Italy) are generally high power-distance communities.

We have studied the norms for the use of address pronouns in five countries with different languages and different cultures. However, Hofstede's model is intended to define cultural differences illustrated by behavioural characteristics but does not specifically include languages and different linguistic behaviour. We wish to emphasise that we have not taken into account the fact that one language cannot always be identified with one nation, and thus, differences in language use in different nations, e.g., English spoken in the UK as opposed to American English, or French spoken in France as opposed to French in other countries (Belgium, Canada, etc.). In addition, there have been legitimate critics (e.g., McSweeney 2002, 2009) that the intranational variation is greater than that between nations. We are aware of these limitations, which to some extent weakens the use of Hofstede in our analyses.

However, these reservations do not compromise our hypothesis, according to which differences in the linguistic codes reflect culture-bound differences. In addition to the obvious typological similarities and differences (French and Italian versus English, German, and Danish, cf. section 0), we have found language-specific differences in the use of address pronouns which seem to cross the typological borders. These distinctions reflect some of the culture-bound dimensions presented by Hofstede and support the hypothesis on a correlation between linguistic and culture-bound variation. Differences in power distance and uncertainty avoidance may contribute to explain the differences among the five countries.

6. Discussion

We have now studied address pronouns in five different languages. Together with English and German, Danish is a Germanic language, while French and Italian are Romance languages with common roots in Latin. This division of language typology is the starting point for much comparative language research, but our results suggest that it cannot stand alone. The analyses have shown that there is a great deal of correlation between language type and the system of address pronouns (cf. section 0), yet there are some striking differences in its use, both within the three Germanic and the two Romance languages. Not surprisingly, we have found similarities between Danish and English, but also between German and the two Romance languages: French and Italian.

In all the studied languages, we can talk about a diaphasic continuum that goes from the formal, over the neutral, to the informal level and a development towards informalisation. In a comparison of the languages, one cannot just translate from column to column, e.g., there is no absolute agreement between the Danish *du*, which can be used in both neutral and informal contexts, and the German, French, and Italian *du/tu/tu*, which are usually only used in informal contexts. Just as in modern Danish, there is nothing rude about using *du* among adults who do not know each other; in German, there is nothing especially polite about *Sie*, which is simply the starting point for public communication among adults (Farø 2015:115). While *du* is considered the unmarked form in modern Danish, the polite pronouns are the unmarked forms in German, French, and Italian.

Thus, in terms of degree of formality, there is not always harmony between culture and language. The level of formality is a relative quantity that varies from culture to culture. Despite linguistic kinship, there may be differences which must rather be attributed to cultural factors. These differences pertain to both intralinguistic variation and comparisons across languages.

In the use of address pronouns, we can see both universal and language- and culture-specific trends. A clear universal tendency is especially linked to the diaphasic dimension, namely the softening of the formal level and who can take the initiative to soften up. The softening takes place during communication. It is usually the top position in the hierarchy who can take the initiative to soften the formal tone, e.g., to suggest that

one should use the informal set of pronouns, *duzen, være dus, tutoyer, dare del tu*; if the other person takes the initiative, it can have inappropriate effects. The one at the top of the hierarchy may feel his position challenged, and this may result in the query being ignored. At the same time as the actual role distribution, e.g., the hierarchical role distribution between teacher and student is (in principle) universal, there is, however, a difference in the perception of the distance between high and low in the UK, Germany, Denmark, France, and Italy. As for the diaphasic, it is also universal in that people who know each other well are more cordial and intimate with each other than people who do not know each other. On the other hand, the implementation of what is considered polite and formal is clearly language specific. In any communication situation, it is important to hit what is appropriate in the situation, taking into account the diastratic and the diaphasic dimensions.

The diasystem is suitable for describing variation within the individual language (every language has its own diasystem, according to Berruto (1987)), and we have previously mentioned the diasystematic dimensions which play a significant role in language variation. There is a clear interrelationship between the dimensions of the diasystem, in the sense that written language, formal language, and high style form a kind of counter-pole to spoken language, informal language, and low style. There is thus a connection between the use of language and a number of extralinguistic factors. New forms of communication, not least the modern electronic means of communication, have an impact on language use and, consequently, in the longer term also on norms and conventions. Such influences are not only internal to language but also occur across languages and cultures and are thus important in intercultural communication. In particular, the inclusion of the extralinguistic aspect explains the need to include dimensions other than those that only have to do with language kinship. When we compare across languages, there is a need for a supplement to traditional diasystematic dimensions with parameters that take into account culturally bound differences. In this connection, we have found it relevant to test whether Hofstede's cultural dimensions could contribute to fulfilling this gap. His theory is based on criteria other than the purely linguistic ones, but since it was designed specifically for business studies and not for general cultural studies, it is evident that it has its limitations.

Even though these are the same communication situations, they still manifest themselves differently in languages that represent different cultures. This is supported by the observation that Italian students have difficulty adapting to Danish norms for contacting their teacher; they categorically chose the formal pronouns and the use of titles, despite calls to soften the formality. They know their role as students and would find themselves in conflict between culture and language if they were to change their self-perception in relation to the recipient. Similarly, a Danish student may have difficulty using titles and polite address pronouns without it seeming jarring and in conflict with the cultural codes, because it signals a humility towards the recipient that does not fall on the Danish student naturally. In all languages, there is a greater tendency for the two communication parties to adapt to each other's language use. In a communication situation where the speaker and the listener are diastratically equal, there are usually no linguistic differences; while, on the other hand, linguistic differences can emerge when there are diastratic differences between speaker and listener in a communication situation. These differences vary greatly from culture to culture. In German, French, and Italian, the diastratic difference between teacher and student entails a higher degree of politeness than is the case in Danish and English. This difference is highly culturally bound and cannot be explained by traditional language typological parameters. Linguistically, there is thus a greater connection between the diastratic and the diaphasic in Germany, France, and Italy, as German, French, and Italian students are much more aware of the diastratic difference that lies in the hierarchical relationship between teacher and students and related linguistic differences. German,¹¹ French, and Italian students thus largely adapt their language to this situational relationship; for example, in the use of titles and forms of inquiry. In contrast, the relationship between students and teachers in Denmark is less hierarchical and thus much less formal, which is reflected linguistically in informal forms of inquiry: first name and no title (see also Kragh et al. 2016). In our paper, we have shown the differences, and in a comparative perspective it can be difficult to choose the right forms if you do not know exactly what you must choose from and what they each signify.

¹¹ This seems striking, considering that Germany, compared to France and Italy, scores relatively low on the power distance dimension.

In-depth knowledge of these norms is very central in intercultural communication, and there are numerous examples of failed communication that can be explained by a lack of this knowledge.

7. Conclusion

We have shown in our analyses that the diasystematic distinctions and their parameters are not sufficient to explain the differences across languages and cultures, and that we, in this context, need an additional dimension. Furthermore, we have discussed possible relations between linguistic differences and culture-bound factors, and we have, in relation to this, found it useful to include a distinction which is not exclusively rooted in linguistic factors but also includes cultural observations. We have tested Hofstede's cultural model and found that – in spite of the reservations mentioned above – it could contribute to establishing a useful platform for including cultural parameters in a variationist approach. We have, moreover, suggested some language- and culture-specific possible parameters, but we are aware that factors related to each individual person also play a role. What can be considered specific at the individual level, in relation to language and culture-specific factors, still remains to be explored. It is, however, clear that the cultural mental universe does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with the typological distinctions. We therefore propose to add a diacultural dimension to the diasystem. Such a dimension could contribute to capture some of the similarities and differences we have presented in this article.

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