

# CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES IN USING PERSONAL PRONOUNS: CASE OF LITHUANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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## 1. Introduction

Foreign language teaching/learning provides a common language which facilitates communication and opens the way for information technologies. Practically every domain of social and economic activities is now based on computer information networks calling for a shared international language. Introducing new technologies is impossible without the knowledge of widely used international languages which function as the common code. There is a danger that less widely used European languages will be affected by the global discourse.

As Tarone and Yule point out, "the use of English as an international language for communication is probably more common today than ever before" (Tarone, Yule, 1987, 49). English discourse is changing our mentality, the way of thinking, talking and communicating, and our cultural-linguistic heritage. This type of discourse is becoming global, American, but not Western. One of the aspects that can be affected by the global discourse are the address forms, which have important significance in the languages which have the distinction between two personal pronoun forms. Using only one type of address form, non-official or familiar, we try to make our communication closer and friendlier. Not having a barrier distinguishing our social status, age or gender or any other criteria we are losing the linguistic expression of hierarchical relations and are becoming equal. Culture-based factors stipulate the usage of formal/informal address forms which are important when learning Lithuanian as a foreign language.

Language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality (Kramersch, 1998). As Mitchell and Myles point out, "language and culture are not separable, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other" (Mitchell, Myles, 1998, 183). Two different address forms are one of cultural realities. It is important to note that cultural aspects are of great importance in intercultural communication (Scollon, Scollon, 2001). In the Lithuanian language like in some other languages (e.g. German, Spanish, French, Hindi, etc.) there is a distinction

between a formal and informal way of addressing other people, that is, there are two forms of the second person pronoun: *tu* and *jūs*. These two personal pronoun forms are used to signal intimacy, solidarity, respect, power and authority (for a wider discussion see Hodge and Kress, 1998). Previous research has shown that in Lithuanian, when used as a mother tongue, the significant factors for using either of the two pronouns are age, sex and social status (Žaromskytė, 2005). The present paper aims at finding out what factors are influential when Lithuanian is used as a foreign language and to what extent they are similar to those of Lithuanians. However, English speakers do not have the same notion in their language. Thus, English speakers' choice to use *tu* 'you-informal' or *jūs* 'you-formal' should be influenced during the second language acquisition. As Hodge and Kress point out, "correct usage requires a person to understand both directionality (who is talking to whom) and system (where the person or persons are 'located' socially and how they can be expected to respond)" (Hodge, Kress, 1998, 41). Therefore, appropriate usage of these forms is difficult to understand for an unwary learner and he/she has to be helped by a teacher, tutor, etc. (Hodge, Kress, 1998; Mitchell, Myles, 1998).

## 2. Method and data

This paper presents the study of sociolinguistic variation. The present research aims at finding out the factors that influence the usage of the formal or the informal pronoun while addressing other people in one's native tongue and in Lithuanian as a foreign language. Qualitative methods have been applied in order to investigate how foreigners learning Lithuanian as a second language use Lithuanian personal pronoun opposition *tu/jūs*.

A preliminary research with foreigners learning Lithuanian as a second language at Vytautas Magnus University was carried out. The respondents were intermediate and advanced level students of the Lithuanian language. Due to a limited number of foreign students at the university the quantitative method was impossible. Thus, the preliminary research is based on questionnaires, personal interviews and direct observations. The respondents were representatives of the following language families: Slavic (Polish, Russian, Czech), Baltic (Latvian), Germanic (English, German, Danish), Romance (French, Italian), and Japanese. The respondents were of different age groups and different sexes; however, the majority of the respondents belonged to the age group of under thirty.

The questionnaire included the questions on the respondent's sex, age, mother tongue and knowledge of foreign languages. The respondents were also asked whether there was a distinction between the two second person forms in their mother tongue, like *tu* and *jūs* in Lithuanian and what was a usual way of addressing people of different age, sex, social status in the respondent's mother tongue. Finally the respondent were asked which form of the personal pronoun the respondent chose to address people of different age, sex, social status when speaking in Lithuanian. Unfortunately, there were few respondents who used Lithuanian as a foreign language in natural situations (such as addressing a Lithuanian spouse), thus some research questions appear to be hypothetical and are to be verified by research of different kind.

The aim of the present investigation was to find out which pronoun form speakers of different languages use to address their family members, unfamiliar people and whether there is a difference in addressing people of different age in their mother tongue. Then we attempted to compare the

respondents' mother tongue model and their Lithuanian model, to see whether there are any language typological and social differences. As Žaromskytė's (2005) research has shown, firstly, familiar older Lithuanians, male and female, use the formal pronoun *jūs* more often than younger Lithuanians. Secondly, unfamiliar senior males and females communicate with each other more formally than the younger ones. Finally, males communicate more formally with females than with representatives of their gender (Žaromskytė, 2005).

### 3. Investigation of the use of personal pronouns

This section introduces the results of the questionnaires in respect of all the different groups of languages and cultures. The questionnaire results have shown that Latvian students use the same model of addressing people in Latvian and Lithuanian and have supported Lauze's research conclusions that Latvians still need the formal pronoun form (Lauze, 2003). Similarly, the Polish and Russian respondents use the same model in their native language and while speaking Lithuanian. In Czech, both pronoun forms can be used and the level of formality is very much individual dependant.

As for the Italian respondents' answers, we can see that the second person singular form is preferred when talking to family members and there is no difference whether these are blood relationships or marriage relationships. However, the same model is not applicable when respondents address their in-laws in Lithuanian. Then *jūs* is used despite age. The questionnaire results demonstrate that the distinction is made between relatives and strangers in Italian. The latter would be always addressed with the formal personal pronoun form. Results of interviews with other respondents, on the contrary, show that the usage of the informal *tu* has become more frequent in Italy. The Italian respondents seem to have adopted the Lithuanian model and switch to *tu* with younger generation people, but they use *jūs* when addressing older generation representatives.

Most French respondents use the informal pronoun form to all family members, except cases when younger in-laws address elder in-laws. Then the formal pronoun form is preferred. Interestingly, there are a few cases when even family members, for example, a son or a daughter talking to his/her parents or grandparents, would address them with the formal pronoun form. This was explained as a family tradition to show respect. The same respondents indicated that they could use both pronoun forms when addressing strangers. It would depend on the level of familiarity. However, the same distinction is not made when they speak Lithuanian. Then only addressing older unfamiliar people *jūs* would be used.

The English and American respondents, who speak only English, answered that, though the very notion of two different pronoun forms is difficult to understand, they forced themselves to learn or were told by their Lithuanian spouses to use the second person plural form where appropriate according to the Lithuanian model, where age and social status is influential. The English speaking respondents also indicated that their knowledge of other languages in which there is a distinction between the two second person pronoun forms helped them understand the Lithuanian model.

The German respondents indicated that they would use the second person singular to all family members and in-laws, and the second person plural to unfamiliar people. They responded that they

would apply the same model when speaking Lithuanian as well. The Danish respondents' answers were quite different. They indicated that the second person singular form is used when talking to family members, familiar and unfamiliar people of both sexes. Even though the second person plural form exists in the Danish language, it is hardly ever used these days. Thus to address a Prime Minister with the informal pronoun is a norm. In Lithuanian, on the contrary, *jūs* was chosen as an appropriate form to address family members like parents and grandparents, also the parents of a spouse and older people. The factors for choosing second person plural form were age and superiority in terms of social status.

The Japanese respondents replied that they would seldom use the second person singular form. If the relationship is close, they would rather use terms like 'mama', 'dad', 'uncle', 'grandpa' to address relatives or names to address friends. Thus even though there is a distinction between the two pronoun forms, respect is a very living feature of Japanese and they find other ways to address people. The respondents marked that when speaking Lithuanian they would use the second person plural pronoun form to address older and unfamiliar people, including parents of a spouse. However, I have observed that even in class Japanese students tend to use *jūs* more often than other students or even more often they try to avoid the pronoun.

#### 4. Generalising remarks

One of the paper hypotheses was that using one or the other pronoun form while addressing people of different age and social status is culture based. However, the preliminary research has shown that it highly depends on an individual and respondents of the same nationality may not necessarily choose the same model.

Another hypothesis was that the use of a particular pronoun form was dependent on social factors. The findings of the questionnaires demonstrate that regarding family members, all respondents answered similarly, i.e. that the most common address form to talk to one's father, mother, grandmother, grandfather is the second person singular form *tu*. There were few cases when parents or grandparents were addressed with the second person plural form, which was preferred due to the respect for older people. When people with no blood relationship, for example, a mother-in-law with a daughter-in-law, talk to each other, the tendency is that the older ones address the younger ones with *tu*, whereas the younger ones address the older ones with *jūs*.

To the question what is the usual way of addressing each other when strangers, for example, two older people, meet, the respondents answered that they would prefer the second person plural form to address each other. The younger generation, on the contrary, prefers the second person singular to address each other in spite of differences in sex. When there is a difference in age, people tend to use the second person plural talking to older ones and the second person singular talking to somebody younger than themselves. Thus it is evident that the age factor influences the choice of the pronoun.

Though respondents were of various ages, no clear generalizations could be made, except for one observation, which is also true of Lithuanians. Some younger respondents prefer *tu* rather than *jūs*. This could be considered as the influence of media and the English language: younger people travel more often, their life is full of IT, TV, Internet and other routines which involve the English language use.

One more thing that was noticed and has to be mentioned is that students who learn Lithuanian as a foreign language can hardly realize the difference between the two pronoun forms as they are not differentiated in class activities and are addressed with *tu* despite their age, sex or social status. Moreover, they are encouraged to say *tu* to a teacher, which is not a custom with Lithuanian students and would be considered as being rude. Thus foreigners who use *tu* in Lithuanian addressing people of different social status do not encounter any problems as long as they are treated as 'temporarily staying' in Lithuania. However, they would be misunderstood if they used the pronoun *tu*, if they wanted to fully adapt and integrate into the Lithuanian society, as Lithuanians, especially the older generation, "is not ready yet to reject the second person plural form of the pronoun" (Žaromskytė, 2005).

One more observation is that individuals, who have the same categories of distinction between the two pronoun forms in their mother tongue, understand this difference in Lithuanian easier and/or quicker. Although it is not a common practice to differentiate between the two pronoun forms during speaking activities in Lithuanian language classes, such students do distinguish cases when they have to use the formal *jūs* instead of the informal *tu*.

The present research shows some tendencies of the personal pronoun usage, but there are some limitations as well. Namely, the questions represented not a natural situation for most respondents. Only a few of them do have Lithuanian spouses and in-laws and filled out the questionnaires from their personal experience. Thus further research will include recording conversations in natural situations and will also seek for quantitative evidence of the research results.

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## KULTŪRINIAI IR LINGVISTINIAI ASMENINIŲ ĮVARDŽIŲ VARTOSENOS SKIRTUMAI: LIETUVIŲ KALBA KAIP SVETIMOJI

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Santrauka

Šiandienos visuomenėje bendravimas, kaip ir svetimosios kalbos mokymas, paremtas informacinėmis technologijomis, kurios reikalauja vienos plačiai vartojamos kalbos, pavyzdžiui, anglų. Natūralu, kad globalus diskursas daro įtaką mažiau vartojamoms kalboms ir lemia tam tikrus jų pokyčius, pavyzdžiui, vis dažniau vartojama familiari asmeninio įvardžio forma *tu*.

Šio straipsnio tikslas – apžvelgti, kokie kultūriniai, socialiniai veiksniai sąlygoja vienos ar kitos įvardžio formos pasirinkimą studento gimtojoje kalboje, jei tokia įvardžių opozicija joje egzistuoja, ir mokantis lietuvių kaip svetimosios kalbos. Straipsnyje aptariami lyginamąja analize, anketine apklausa, interviu ir stebėjimu pagrįsto tyrimo rezultatai. Tyrimo metu surinkti duomenys, kaip užsieniečiai studentai vartoja dvi asmeninio įvardžio formas kreipdamiesi į šeimos narius ir į skirtingo amžiaus pažįstamus ir nepažįstamus žmones savo gimtąja kalba ir lietuviškai. Nors apklausti skirtingų kalbų (anglų, čekų, danų, japonų, italų, latvių, prancūzų, rusų ir kt.) atstovai, rasta nemažai šių įvardžio formų vartosenos studentų gimtojoje ir lietuvių kalboje panašumų. Pastebėta, kad studentai dažnai įsisavina lietuviškąjį kreipimosi į kitus asmenis modelį, kai formalios įvardžio formos vartoseną lemia tokie veiksniai kaip amžius, socialinis statusas, lytis. Sunkiau formalią įvardžio formą įsisavinti tiems studentams, kurių gimtoji kalba yra anglų ir kurie nekalba jokia kita užsienio kalba. Šio tyrimo metu pastebėtas tendencijas ateityje bus mėginama pagrįsti kitokio pobūdžio tyrimais.