

Forms of Address in the College Classroom

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Abstract

Forms of address are a critical component of language. They can be used to set the tone of a communicative exchange and index social status. Many languages encode these linguistic forms directly into their grammar; however, in English these politeness distinctions are expressed lexically through word choice as speakers must select amongst various forms of a name (e.g., first/last name) and/or title (e.g., Mr., Mrs., Dr.) when addressing a communicative partner.

We are currently seeing changes in speakers' selections of address forms in American English. This is particularly true in academic settings where most students – and many professors – are now addressed by their first names. In this paper, I look more closely at address forms in the college classroom, looking specifically at what address forms college students are most likely to use and why. My findings suggest that while informal address may be becoming more common in the classroom, the selection of address forms is still far from predictable. Students' selections of address forms vary according to the particular mode of communication, the degrees of familiarity between the instructor and student, the personality of the instructor, and the type of course being taught.

1. Introduction

Forms of address are the linguistic forms used when introducing oneself or for addressing others. As Brown & Ford (1961) observe, the selection of address forms is governed by the relationship between the speaker and his/her addressee, which can be somewhat complicated to define. This is because one's selection of address forms is largely a socially-driven phenomenon (Murphy 1988), used to help establish the tone of a communicative exchange, specify degrees of politeness, and index social status.

Many languages encode different forms of address directly into their grammar. For example, as shown in Table 1, in a variety of languages, speakers are constrained by the language to choose between formal and informal "you" when addressing any communicative partner:

Table 1: Formal/Informal "you" Across Languages

Language	Formal "you"	Informal "you"
Spanish	<i>Usted</i>	<i>tu</i>
Italian	<i>Lei</i>	<i>tu</i>
French	<i>Vous</i>	<i>tu</i>
German	<i>Sie</i>	<i>du</i>
Persian	<i>Šoma</i>	<i>to</i>
Russian	<i>Вы</i>	<i>Ты</i>

Thus, whenever speakers of these languages wish to address one another, they are immediately confronted with a decision of using formal or informal address. Different factors may influence these linguistic choices – such as differences in age, intimacy, and social distance between the

speaker and addressee. However, for native speakers these decisions are largely unconscious. According to Musumeci (1991: 434), native grammars rarely specify rules for selecting among these linguistic choices; instead, native speakers seem to acquire the appropriate uses of these forms through natural use and observation.

Asian languages such as Japanese and Korean have even richer systems for grammaticalizing social relations. As illustrated in Saeed (2003: 188-189), languages like Japanese not only mark distinctions between speakers and addressees but also distinctions to any third person referenced in the conversation:

- a. *Tanaka-san ga kudasaimashita.*
'Mr. Tanaka gave it to me.'
[where hearer is on a somewhat formal basis with speaker]
- b. *Tanaka-san ga kudasatta.*
'Mr. Tanaka gave it to me.'
[where hearer is a friend of speaker]
- c. *Jiroo-kun ga kuremashita.*
'Jiro gave it to me.'
[where hearer is in a semi-formal relationship with speaker]
- d. *Jiroo-kun ga kureta.*
'Jiro gave it to me.'
[where hearer is a friend of speaker]

Languages like English do not grammaticalize differences in informal versus formal address between the speaker, listener, or others. It is still possible to mark social distinctions in such languages; however, it must be made through alternative means, such as lexical selection. For example, in English, speakers can use various forms of a name (e.g., first/last name/nickname) and/or title (e.g., Mr., Mrs., Dr.) when addressing a communicative partner. This allows speakers to establish the relationship between themselves and others, as well as specify varying degrees of intimacy and respect. There are, nonetheless, two consequences with these types of linguistic systems. First, because politeness forms and respect forms are not "built into" the linguistic system directly, lexically-driven address forms become particularly critical for establishing the tone of any communicative exchange – more so than in languages which also grammaticalize address forms. Second, because these address forms are lexically-driven and not grammatically-driven, they are more likely to undergo linguistic change. This is because grammatical features tend to be somewhat stable in languages, while lexical items often undergo semantic drift. Thus, in languages like English, we would expect to see variability in the use and meaning associated with different address forms.

Looking closely at American English today, this is indeed what appears to be going on. Many Americans are aware that forms of address have been getting more informal in English. This has been verified by work by Hook (1984) and Murray (2002) who report that address forms in American English have been undergoing some major changes toward informality where first-name usage, in particular, has become increasingly common. As Hook (1984: 186) points out, doctors are more likely to address patients by first name, as are automobile salespeople, real estate agents, and even telephone pitch-men and pitch-women.

It appears that another place where address forms are changing is in academic settings, where informal address is becoming more common between students and their professors. Nowadays, most students are addressed by their first names, and anecdotally, university faculty of all ages report that this practice is becoming increasingly common for professors as well. Thus, in this paper, I look more closely at address forms in the college classroom, looking specifically at what

address forms college students are most likely to use and why. My findings suggest that while informal address may be becoming more common in the classroom, the selection of address forms is still far from predictable. Students' selections of address forms vary according to the particular mode of communication, the degrees of familiarity between the instructor and student, the personality of the instructor, and the type of course being taught.

2. Study

For this study, students at a mid-sized public university were presented with a survey that asked them to consider their preferences regarding titles of address – in particular, the ways in which they are most likely to address their college professors.

2.1: Participants

Seventy-four students participated in this study – 43 of the participants were female and 31 of the participants were male. While all of the participants were born in the United States, 11 of the participants identified their native-language as something other than English. Participants ranged in age between 19 years and 33 years, with the average age of 21 years. Most of the participants were of Junior or Senior standing; however, two of the participants were second-semester Sophomores, and four of the participants were graduate students.

Student participation in the survey was voluntary; however, participation fulfilled one of the Cultural Event requirements for a General Education course. Participants were placed in a quiet room, and the survey was distributed by a volunteer who wasn't involved in the study. Participants were told only that their responses would be used for "research purposes" and merely asked to provide their honest assessments; it was also emphasized that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers to the survey questions.

After the survey was completed, the participants were debriefed by the researcher who then engaged the group on a discussion of the survey topic. Anecdotal comments from the debriefing discussion were jotted down by both the researcher and her undergraduate student assistant.

2.2: Materials

The survey was split up into three separate parts.

Part I asked participants to indicate their preferred terms of address for referencing their professors in different situations. An example is provided in (1) below:

1. How are you *most likely* to address a professor you have not met before? For each scenario, check one and only one answer.

Scenario 1: the professor is named Marsha Johnson and you are sending her an e-mail before the class first meets

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | a. Marsha | <input type="checkbox"/> | d. Miss/Ms./Mrs. Johnson (circle one) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | b. Dr. Johnson | <input type="checkbox"/> | e. Other (please explain): |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | c. Professor Johnson | | |

The scenarios differed according to the sex of the instructor, the mode of communication (whether the student was sending an e-mail, leaving a phone message, or communicating in a face-to-face conversation), and the degree of closeness between the professor and the student (whether the student was addressing a familiar vs. an unfamiliar professor).

Part II asked participants to reflect on which address forms they have used in the past for their professors (e.g., Dr., Professor, Mr./Mrs., first name) and what factors influenced these selections. An example is provided in (2):

2. Have you ever called one of your professors by his or her first name?
- yes
 - no

If **NO**, why?

If **YES**, which factors are most likely to determine whether or not you refer to them by their first names? Check all that apply, and please add any additional comments or explanations below:

- a. sex/gender
- b. age
- c. personality
- d. familiarity (i.e., how well you know him/her)
- e. nature of interaction (e.g., asking about a grade vs. reporting an absence)
- f. type of class
- g. other (please explain)

Finally, Part III of the survey contained several open-ended questions that asked participants to consider their attitudes toward their instructors' selections of particular address forms. An example is provided below:

3. When one of your college professors introduces himself/herself with the title "Professor," what assumptions are you most likely to make about the professor and the course?

The participants were given 30 minutes to complete the survey; however, most completed it in 15 – 20 minutes. The participants were also encouraged to write down any additional comments they thought to be relevant.

2.4: Results

Part I: Scenarios

The first part of the survey asked participants to select address forms for professors based on several different scenarios. The results indicated that there were no statistical differences in the selections of address forms for male professors versus female professors; nor were their differences in the selections made between male and female respondents. Thus, gender was not considered to be a differentiating factor in this study and won't be discussed further in this paper.

However, there were differences in the selection of address forms based on familiarity and mode of communication. The first set of questions asked participants how they would most likely address professors they had not met before, and, as shown in Table 2, the participants were fairly conservative in their selections, showing a tendency to select the more formal forms of address. Overall, "Professor" was the preferred title of address, with a selection rate of 59.5% – 73%, depending on the scenario. Generic titles were selected 13.5% of the time, and "Dr." was selected 8% – 13.5% of the time. First-Name selection was rare, selected only in a small number of face-to-face situations. Participants also selected "Other" 13.5% of the time for the scenarios involving face-to-face conversations; as indicated on their surveys, participants chose "Other" for situations where they felt no form of address was needed.

Table 2: Addressing Unfamiliar Professors

	E-mail		Phone		Face-to-Face	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Professor	73%	73%	70%	70%	59.5%	59.5%
Dr.	13.5%	13.5%	11%	11%	8%	8%
Generic	13.5%	13.5%	13.5%	13.5%	13.5%	13.5%
First Name	0%	0%	0%	0%	5.5%	5.5%
Other	0%	0%	5.5%	5.5%	13.5%	13.5%

Not surprisingly, participants chose less formal address forms for professors with whom they were familiar. “Professor” was still the preferred title of address, with a selection rate of just over 50%. Generic titles and “Dr.” were again selected much less often (8%–11% of the time), and First-Name selection was somewhat more common, with a selection rate of 8%–19%. “Other” was chosen 8%–11% of the time – again, in situations where participants felt no particular address form was necessary. These results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Addressing Familiar Professors

	E-mail		Phone		Face-to-Face	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Professor	54%	57%	57%	57%	54%	54%
Dr.	11%	11%	11%	11%	8%	11%
Generic	11%	11%	11%	11%	11%	11%
First Name	13.5%	11%	8%	8%	19%	16%
Other	11%	11%	11%	11%	8%	8%

The written comments from the survey were perhaps most insightful. Student comments made it clear that the mode of communication mattered when it came to selecting address forms. Participants perceived e-mail as the most formal system of communication and, thus, were more likely to use academic titles such as “Professor” or “Dr.” in that context. Face-to-face conversations were viewed as the least formal communicative situation and the situation where students were most likely to use a first name. Finally, the act of leaving a phone messages was perceived as being somewhat formulaic; thus, students often commented that in this case, no particular address form was necessary. As one student noted, “When you leave a phone message, you really only need to identify yourself – they’ve already identified who they are on the message. So I typically just say who I am and what I want.”

Part II: Personal Experiences

When reflecting on their personal experiences with address forms, it was clear that participants varied considerably with what forms they used and were most comfortable. As summarized in Table 4, 95% of the students claimed that at some point in their academic career they have called one of their professors “Professor,” while 76% have used “Dr.,” 43% have used a generic title, and 78% have called a professor by his or her first name.

Table 4: Past Use of Different Forms of Address

	Professor	Dr.	Generic	First Name
Percent Used	95%	76%	43%	78%
Percent Not Used	5%	24%	57%	22%

Again, written comments were particularly revealing in this portion of the survey. Participants were particularly vocal about why they avoided particular address forms, as demonstrated in Table 5. Only 5% of the surveyed students claimed they haven't used "Professor" as a form of address. Those who hadn't used it were either unsure of why that was or noted that they avoided it because they felt it was too "wordy" or difficult to say. 24% of students claimed they had never used "Dr." as a title of address for a college professor. For many, this was because they felt it was only appropriate as a title of address for medical doctors; other noted that they avoided it because it sounded awkward or overly formal.

57% of students claimed they had never used a generic title like "Mr." or "Ms." when addressing a college professor. Some noted it seemed too disrespectful for college instructors, some felt it was only appropriate for elementary or high school teachers, and others claimed they avoided using generic terms for females in particular because they were unsure of which form to use.

Finally, only 22% of students claimed they had never called a college professor by his or her first name. This response was particularly common from students who identified their native language as something other than English. Some noted this was not allowed in their cultural background, some said it seemed disrespectful, and others claimed they avoided first-name usage because they preferred to have more clearly defined roles with their instructors.

Table 5: Reasons for Not Using Certain Titles

	Reason
Professor	Unsure, tongue-twister
Dr.	Not an MD, Emily Post says it is inappropriate, sounds awkward, too formal, never been asked
Generic	Seems disrespectful, appropriate only for elementary/high school teachers, too informal, unsure of which form to use with females
First Name	Seems disrespectful, not allowed in my culture, too uncomfortable, need defined roles

As illustrated in Table 6, participant responses were just as varied for why they chose to use certain titles of address. Overall, the students in my survey showed preference for the use of "Professor," claiming they found it to be most encompassing as it can be used for those with or without a PhD. 43% also noted that their use of "Professor" depended on the personality of the instructor (i.e., they were more likely to use it with more reserved instructors) and familiarity. 32% said it depended on the type of class being taught, with a tendency to use "Professor" with their science and business instructors, but not with their humanities and arts instructors.

Students were most likely to use "Dr." as a term of address when it was explicitly dictated by the course instructor, particularly when instructors introduced themselves by using that term. 22% indicated that their use of "Dr." depended on familiarity, and 19% said it depended on personality. Others noted that they used it out of respect or deference, some feeling, in particular, that it was most appropriate for older male instructors with PhDs. As one student commented, "I personally hate using 'Dr.' It's stuffy. But it seems like the older professors – especially the guys – prefer that. So I use it with them."

Students noted that they tended to use generic titles of address when they were talking with a professor they weren't familiar with, especially when they were unclear about the professor's academic background. Some also claimed they used generic titles out of habit – either a habit ingrained in them by their high school teachers or one ingrained in them by their parents. As one student noted, "From the time I was little, my mom insisted I address my elders by 'Mr.' or 'Mrs.' regardless of who they were or what they did. So I do!"

Finally, a number of students have used first-name address with their college professors. 73% claimed they do this only with professors they are familiar with, 48% claimed that personality matters, and 30% claimed that class-type matters. Some also noted they prefer first-name address because it puts everyone in the class on an equal footing. As one student summarized, “I like being on a first-name basis with my professors because I feel like there is a mutual respect – but I only do this with the ones that are more laid-back and relaxed, like my English teachers.”

Table 6: Factors that Influence Title Selection

	Professor	Dr.	Generic	First Name
Sex	11%	5%	8%	11%
Age	27%	13.5%	19%	19%
Personality	43%	19%	13.5%	48%
Familiarity	43%	22%	27%	73%
Nature of Interaction	35%	16%	19%	16%
Class Type	32%	27%	11%	30%
Other	41% (good default, less formal, appropriate for academia, more encompassing)	54% (teacher request, listed on board/syllabus)	8% (habit, more general)	49% (teacher request, peer use, friendlier, easier)

Part III: Assumptions Based on Title Selections

The final part of the survey asked participants to reflect on the assumptions they made about a professor or course based on the way the instructors addressed themselves. Because these were open-ended questions, not surprisingly, the responses again varied. However, by tallying up common responses, I did notice some interesting patterns. These can be viewed in Table 7.

Overall, students perceived instructors who introduced themselves as “Professor” positively. They were assumed to be well-educated, smart, and likely to hold a PhD or graduate degree. The participants also assumed the courses would be interesting and enjoyable but challenging. Eight students, however, noted they wouldn’t make any particular assumption about the course or professor, being that they view this title as a default. As one wrote, “I doubt I’d even think about it. It’s just pretty standard.”

Students perceived instructors who introduced themselves as “Dr.” somewhat negatively. These instructors were assumed to be unapproachable, unfriendly, lecturers, hard graders, and insecure. However, these instructors were also assumed to hold PhDs or graduate degrees and be well educated and smart. The assumptions made about the courses were that they would be tough, challenging, interesting, but dull. One student commented, “As soon as I hear Dr., I know I won’t like this course. It will be *borrrring!!!*”

When instructors introduced themselves with generic titles, the most common assumption was that the instructor didn’t have a PhD or graduate degree. Some also noted the instructor was likely to be old-fashioned, and, if she was a female, someone who felt the need to clarify her marital status or showcase her feminism. The assumptions made about the courses were that they would be easy but boring. One student succinctly noted, “No doubt. Easy A!”

Finally, students had very mixed impressions about an instructor’s introduction using a first name in the class. The most common assumptions were that the instructor would be friendly or laid-back and that the course would be enjoyable and interesting. Others noted that was a cue that the instructor wouldn’t lecture much, would be an easy grader, was less competent in the field, or

was new to teaching. Some were markedly turned off by first-name usage because they felt it implied an unnatural intimacy. One student commented, “I don’t actually like it when professors want to be on a first-name basis with us. It’s like they want to be our buddies. But I’m not their buddy. I’m their student.”

Table 7: Assumptions Based on the Use of Certain Titles

	Assumptions
Professor	Instructor has PhD/graduate degree (26) Course will be interesting (17) Course will be enjoyable (15) Course will be tough/challenging (14) Instructor is well-educated/smart (11) No particular assumption/wouldn’t notice (8)
Dr.	Instructor will be unapproachable/unfriendly (42) Instructor has PhD/graduate degree (28) Course will be tough/challenging (24) Instructor is well-educated/smart (19) Instructor will be a hard grader (12) Course will be interesting (7) Instructor will lecture a lot (7) Course will be boring (5) Instructor is insecure (3)
Generic	Instructor doesn’t have PhD/graduate degree (38) Instructor is old-fashioned/old-school (16) Course will be easy (11) Course will be boring (8) Instructor (if woman) wants to clarify her marital status (8) Instructor (if woman) wants to showcase feminism (5)
First Name	Instructor will be friendly/laid-back (41) Course will be enjoyable (33) Course will be interesting (27) Instructor is less competent/knowledgeable in the field (12) Instructor won’t lecture a lot (13) Instructor will be an easy grader (11) Instructor doesn’t have a PhD/graduate degree (6) Instructor is new to teaching (6) Instructor wants to be “buddies” (3)

3: Summary and Discussion

The findings from this survey indicate that the selection of address forms in academic settings varies considerably. Overall, the preferred term of address for college professors is “Professor.” 95% of students surveyed reported using this form of address at least once in their academic careers. In general, students felt that “Professor” indicated a degree of formality and respect without being overly formal. Moreover, they perceived instructors who used it as being well educated and smart and the courses as being interesting, enjoyable, and yet challenging.

While 76% of the students surveyed reported having used “Dr.” to address a college professor, it was not the preferred form of address for most participants. They found “Dr.” to be overly formal and even inappropriate as an address form for their college professors; moreover, they perceived those who used it as being unapproachable, boring, and insecure.

43% of the students surveyed reported using generic titles for their college professors; however, for many, this was just a response to an ingrained habit. Students found generic titles to

be old-fashioned. Moreover, many assumed that when instructors introduced themselves with generic titles, it was an indicator that the instructor didn't have a PhD or graduate degree.

Finally, 78% of the students reported using first-name address with their college professors, particularly with those who they perceived as being laid back. Many students liked being on a first-name basis with their professors, as they felt it helped to place everyone on equal footing in the classroom and indicated mutual respect; others disliked it, feeling it didn't establish the appropriate boundaries between student and teacher. Students also had a mixed response when professors explicitly introduced themselves with first names. Some felt it indicated that the instructor was friendly and that the course would be enjoyable; others felt it just indicated the course would be easy or that the instructor was merely looking for a "buddy."

As a first attempt, this study indicates an interesting complexity in the use of address forms in academia, showing that address forms in academia are complicated and variable and that their use is not without consequence. However, it needs to be acknowledged that this study has its limitations. First, the survey used in this study only addressed students' perceptions about address forms based on created situations or past experiences; it didn't measure their actual performance. Often, one's perception of his/her behavior is quite different from his/her actual behavior. Second, the majority of students who participated in this survey were born and raised in California and attending what is often considered a very laid-back residential college. It is possible that students across the United States – and at different types and calibers of colleges – would respond differently to the survey questions. Thus, I plan to expand this study to collect data from a wider-range of students that not only looks at perception but at actual behavior as well.

Minimally, what we can take from this study is the fact that address forms are changing in American English in ways that are very complicated to describe. Moreover, especially for those of us in academia, having a better understanding of these changes is critical. One of the first ways we interact with our students is through an exchange of address forms, which, perhaps unbeknownst to us, apparently conveys a considerable amount of information – such as how educated we are, how smart we are, how interesting our course will be, and whether we're prone to being hard-graders, lecturers, or simply *borrrrring!*

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