

Forms of Address: How Their Social Functions May Vary

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The point of view presented in this essay is primarily Bantu, one of the several groups of sub-Saharan Africans typically characterized as black. Moreover, the outlook is that of a person who grew up in the transition from colonial Zaire (then the Belgian Congo, in central Africa) to postindependence Zaire, in an education system that fosters an interesting coexistence of colonial European and local African cultures. From a sociolinguistic point of view, French, inherited from the colonial days as the official language and the medium of education from the fourth grade up to higher education, has been adapted to convey this marriage of African and colonial European cultures heavily anchored in the African tradition.

In this essay, I show how this background affected my reaction over fifteen years ago to English forms of address, as used at a major midwestern American university. With time, I have also learned that the customs described in this essay do not apply universally to the overall American society. However, I think that these first impressions reflect best my then unacculturated perception of a facet of American culture.

The term "form of address" is used in this essay as much for names, like *Peter*, *Mary*, and *Bob*, as for titles, like *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Dr.*, and *Professor*, which are normally used before last or full names, for example, *Mr. (Paul) Simon* or *Dr. (Alice) Rosenfeld*. The term is also used for other titles such as *sir* and *ma'am*, normally used without a name; for kinship terms such as *Dad*, *Mom*, and *son* used to address relatives; for pet names such as *buttercup* and *cupcake*; or for any word used to address

a person. Ethnographically, these forms of address specify the relation between the speaker and the addressee (for example, pals, professionals, parent-child, lovers) and the terms of their interaction (for example, distant, close, intimate), depending sometimes on the specific circumstances of the communication. To take an American example, a person named *Alice Rosenfeld* may be addressed in various ways, depending on context. She may be addressed as *Dr. Rosenfeld* in formal professional interaction, as *Mrs.* or *Ms. Rosenfeld* in situations where she is not well known, as *Mom* by her children, as *Alice* by her husband and colleagues in places where professional relations are not formal, and as *dear*, *darling*, or *honey* by her husband in intimate interaction.

I will restrict my observations on the American system to the usage of forms of address after the first time people have been introduced to each other. I will ignore those situations where preestablished relationships might allow usage of pet names and kinship titles, for instance, the title *uncle* extended to friends of the speaker's parents or blood uncles. However, it will help to provide more general background information about myself at this point, so that the reader may understand my original shock at how Americans address each other, at least at the university I attended.

In my Bantu background, addressees' names are often avoided in quite a variety of situations in order to express deference and/or intimacy. For instance, in the Bantu vernacular languages, people of the same age as one's parents are addressed by the same titles as the parents of the same sex, with the terms *papa* or *tata* (father) or *mama* (mother) prefixed to their names to express deference, for example, *Papa Kaniki* or *Mama Moseka*. These honorifics (that is, special forms of address for respect) are also used alone, without a name.

to express both deference and intimacy when the speaker knows the addressee closely. For instance, in Kikongo-Kituba (my regional lingua franca), a close relation of the speaker's family who is of approximately the same age as, or older than, his or her father may be addressed as follows: *Papa, ebwe?* (Papa, how are you?).

When used alone to address strangers, the honorifics *papa* and *mama* are simple markers of politeness corresponding to the English honorifics *sir* and *ma'am*, used without a name, or to the honorifics *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Ms.*, *Dr.*, and the like prefixed to the last names in formal interaction. These honorifics also are often used for addresses of the age group of the speaker's children as affective forms of address, corresponding to, for instance, the use of *son* by a nonkin. Thus, the sentence *Papa, ebwe?* used by an adult to a child is affective and may be translated idiomatically as "How are you, son/darling/dear?" All these Bantu forms of address fit in a system in which addressees' names are generally avoided, a practice to which I return below.

People of the age group of the speaker's older siblings are addressed in Kikongo-Kituba either by prefixing the kinship honorific *yaya* (older sibling) to their names for deference or by using the title alone for both deference and intimacy, for example, *Yaya Kalala*. Ethnographically, this corresponds in American English to addressing such a close relation by his or her first name or nickname.

A number of older male persons are assimilated to uncles and are addressed on the same pattern as above with the kinship honorific *noko* (uncle), for example, *Noko Mukoko*. However, note that many of the people addressed with this honorific would not be addressed with the honorific *uncle* in American English, since they may not be close friends of the speaker's parents or blood uncles.

Adult close friends often address one another by their professional titles, if these are considered as achievements (for example, *Munganga ebwe?* [Dr. (MD), how are you?]), or by their nicknames or play names (for example, *Mbongo mpasi, ebwe?* [Hard Money, how are you?]). This custom is to express intimacy. In the case of professional titles, close associates bear the responsibility of setting up examples for others to follow; deference starts at home. Once more, usage of addressees' names is generally restricted to situations where it is absolutely necessary to make clear which person is being addressed, for instance, when more than one person in the same setting may be addressed by the same honorific.

Much of the same behavior is carried on in local French, except that the honorifics *monsieur* (sir), *madame* (ma'am), and *mademoiselle* (miss) are generally substituted for the traditional honorifics derived from kin terms. More recently, the honorifics *citoyen* (male citizen) and *citoyenne* (female citizen) were used by a

political-ideological decree from the government in 1971 to distinguish the natives from foreigners.¹ Like the Bantu honorifics based on kin terms, they are generally used alone without the addressees' names. In all such cases, it is generally thought that only deference, not social distance, is expressed. Thus, translations with western European honorifics generally distort the ethnographic meaning somewhat, since they suggest social distance where none is suggested in either the Bantu forms of address with honorifics for deference or the local French adaptations to the system. For instance, the translation of the local French sentence *Suivez-moi, citoyen(ne)* (Follow me, citizen(ne)) either becomes odd if *citoyen(ne)* is also translated as *citizen* or distorted if it is translated idiomatically as *sir* or *ma'am*. In the latter case, the idiomatic translation assigns higher status to the addressee, whereas the honorific *citoyen(ne)* does not.

Last, aside from the fact that names are generally avoided, it matters little in the Bantu system whether the first name or the surname is used. In any case, to make up for the tradition, speakers of local French often use the traditional Bantu honorifics, the kind of thing that is done less comfortably in a native French setting, unless all the interactants are from the same Bantu background. Note also that, as a rule, French requires that the polite pronoun *vous*, rather than the intimate pronoun *tu*, be used to address people concomitantly with the above titles. In fact, *vous* in the construction *Vous pouvez partir, monsieur/madame* (You may leave, sir/ma'am) assigns high status to the addressee. Using the traditional Bantu honorifics makes allowance for the intimate or status-free pronoun *tu*, which in a construction such as *Tu peux partir, papa* (You may leave, father) conveys both deference and intimacy or lack of status, depending on the case. Using *vous* together with *papa* makes explicit either the higher status of the addressee or the speaker's decision to establish social distance in the interaction.

In my American experience, I had to learn new norms of conduct. Honorifics based on age, and often even on rank, are commonly avoided.² My shock started in my first class, when the professor asked to be addressed as Jerry. Most of the other professors did likewise, regardless of age.³ I found out that generally people do not give their titles when introducing themselves. More often than not, they either give only the first name or ask to be addressed by the first name. Further, the first names have usually been clipped to monosyllabics or disyllabics; for example, *Fred* is short for *Frederick* and *Ed* is short for *Edward*. Sometimes first names have been replaced by seemingly unrelated short nicknames; for example, *Bob* and *Bobby* are short for *Robert* and *Ted* is short for *Edward*. The native French transitional address system according to which persons are addressed by their honorifics and the pronoun *vous*,

until there is a tacit or explicit agreement to convert to an intimate and informal mode of address, does not exist in America.

There is more to this American system of address. Foreigners are rebaptized, so to speak! The often long and "complicated" first names are replaced by nicknames. Ever since my first class, I have usually been addressed as *Sali*. The few Americans that say "Sali-koko" either find the name "musical" or want to show off their familiarity with foreign names, in contrast with the regular reaction "I can't say that one."

However, addressing people by their first names does not necessarily mean a close relationship or intimacy. As suggested above, there are ways of expressing closeness or intimacy, but these will not be discussed here. The American system of address is basically a sign of informality, which is created from the onset of a social relationship, much sooner than I would have expected in the mixed cultural background I came from.

I also learned something else about names. As noted above, it makes little difference in the Bantu system whether one is addressed by one's first name or by one's surname, whenever names must or can be used. Names are typically avoided when addressing some relations, such as close friends, and names are taboo in addressing or referring to one's own parents. In the case of friends, professional titles or descriptive nicknames dealing with events in one's life are normally used. Name avoidance is a sign of closeness or intimacy. It is considered disrespectful to address ascending and descending in-laws by their names. Their kinship titles must be used not only to express deference but also to reassert the close social bond of the extended family by marriage. The expectation to use kinship honorifics in this case applies even to spouses' relatives when they interact among themselves, for instance, when the wife's cousin interacts with the husband's cousin.

The Bantu custom is in sharp contrast with the American custom of using first names or nicknames between close friends and with most in-laws.⁴ In the beginning, I found it bizarre to see ascending and descending in-laws (fathers- and mothers-in-law and sons- and daughters-in-law, respectively) address each

other by their first names and to see them interact casually with each other. (In my background, ascending and descending in-laws maintain avoidance relationships.) The new custom gave me the impression that Americans did not care much about these special, affined ties and that all social relations were of the same kind. I also assumed then that Americans did not distinguish between acquaintances and friends. In addition, I thought that Americans became personal with people they had just met rather quickly. (This impression was due essentially to the stereotypical French address system I had learned in school in Zaire.) As noted above, acculturation to American ways has now taken the original shock away. However, coming from my Third World background, there was more to be overwhelmed by than space-age technology.

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NOTES

1. This custom was patterned on the French system during Napoleon Bonaparte's regime in the nineteenth century to suggest an egalitarian revolution in the way Zaireans interact with each other. The corruption and the socioeconomic discriminatory system it was meant to eradicate have grown stronger, starting from the political leadership, and a reactionary trend has now reverted to the current French forms of address with *monsieur* (sir), *madame* (ma'am), or *mademoiselle* (miss) when formality is required.
2. I will disregard here professional titles such as *Dr.* (for medical doctors) that act as part of the name in professional settings. Constraints are more complex here regarding when the title may be dropped.
3. There are apparently some exceptions to this observation. In my graduate school experience, I knew of some professors in their sixties that most students addressed as Mr. _____, though their much younger colleagues still addressed them by their first names.
4. I do not wish to ignore cases of assimilation where in-laws are addressed by the same kinship titles the spouse uses for them. However, coming from my background, another peculiarity here is that the assimilation applies almost only to the speaker relative to his or her spouse's relatives; his or her own relatives do not assimilate and show intimacy or closeness by using first names.