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## Swedish Forms of Address : Condescending or Polite ?

Johanna KARLSSON

### 要 旨

### 相手に話しかけるときのスウェーデン語の2人称代名詞 一人を見下すそれとも丁寧？—

ヨーロッパの多くの言語に丁寧さを表す2人称の特別な代名詞があることは、特に珍しいことではない。スウェーデンも中世から1800年代に至るまで同様であった。階層の上位の人に敬意を表したり、話しかけたりしたいときには、代名詞 *ni* が用いられた。一方階層の下位の人に話しかける場合には *du* が用いられた。しかしながら、1700年代～1800年代に *ni* の用法に変化が生じ、*ni* は次第に社会階層の下位の人に対して使われる、距離感を特徴づける代名詞、非丁寧な代名詞に変わった。スウェーデン語には丁寧さを表す代名詞がなかったので、この結果、2人称代名詞の用法に揺れが生じた。そこで、丁寧さを表す代名詞として *ni* を再導入したい勢力との状況でも一般的に使用できる代名詞 *du* を導入したい勢力との間で衝突が生じたが、*du* を標榜する人たちが勝利した。1900年代半ばまで *du* が2人称の一般的な代名詞であり、*ni* による丁寧を示す用法は基本的に消えた。

1980年代になるとサービス産業界で若者たちが自分の顧客に対して2人称の代名詞 *ni* を使い始める、という新しい現象が生まれた。その理由について今日有力な説は1970年代から1980年代にかけて学校教育で外国語を学習することが以前にもまして人気となり、多くの生徒たちが他の多くの言語に存在する丁寧さを表す2人称の代名詞がスウェーデン語に欠如していると感じ、彼らがこの用法を取り入れたというものである。この *ni* の新しい用法は丁寧を示す2人称代名詞に向けての試みであったが、*ni* が人を見下すことも表した2人称代名詞の時代を経験している人たちには快く受け入れられなかった。この語に対し肯定的な含意を持つ人たちと否定的な含意を抱いている人たちの間で分離分裂が起きてしまった。スウェーデンでは今日でも2人称の代名詞の問題は熱いテーマである。

Keywords : address pronoun, Swedish, language change  
キーワード : 2人称代名詞、スウェーデン語、言語変化

## 1 . Introduction

- If I asked you to write down ten of the most Swedish things you know, what would you write ?

This was a question that Lars-Gunnar Andersson, a professor at Göteborg University, asked me and nineteen other university teachers at a seminar about teaching Swedish abroad in August 2006. Naturally we came up with many different ideas about what we considered typical Swedish, but when we compared our lists there was one thing most of us had written : "att dua", a Swedish expression that means : to use the second person pronoun singular as a general address pronoun. We could choose anything at all - Volvo, ABBA, Celsius, IKEA - and still most of us came to think about the way we address each other. When we were asked what we personally thought about Swedish forms of address our answers turned into a heated discussion that lasted for several hours, long after the seminar had ended.

The matter of how to address each other has been a hot topic in Sweden for over a century, and the discussion has its roots in the search for equality. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sweden was a country where a 12-hour workday in a dangerous environment was normal, pensions, parental leave and child allowance did not exist, women were not allowed to vote and schools were for children with rich parents. In this environment the labor movement grew strong and within that movement the idea about a non-hierarchical society became one of the most important issues : equality between rich and poor, equality between employers and employees, equality between men and women. It was a fight against the old society, where difference in status was very important and very visible through the way people addressed each other [Mårtensson 1987 : 29]. By the 1960's it seemed like the ones fighting for a new system of personal pronouns had won. The way Swedish people addressed each other had completely changed and there were almost no signs left of the old hierarchical system. Many Swedish people would agree with the twenty university teachers, that the struggle for a non-hierarchical society where not even the personal pronoun shows your status in society is one of the most Swedish things that exists, a base of the Swedish culture. So why do people in Sweden still discuss the issue ? The reason is that young people in Sweden seem to have put the language through yet another alteration, an alteration that leaves no one unmoved. Is the change a backlash in language development, or is it progress ? Could it possibly be seen as both ?

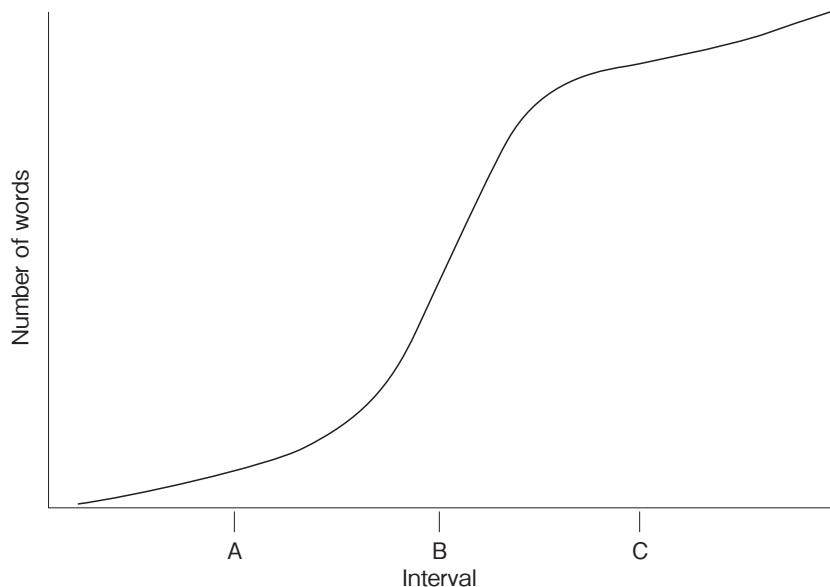
In this article I will try to explain the background of today's situation. I will make a short summary of the evolution of Swedish forms of address before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and after that I will discuss how and why the large change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century came about. I will end this article with some theories about the most recent change in

Swedish forms of address, an issue that still brings along many aroused feelings. But first comes a review of some of the theories about how languages actually change.

## 2. How Languages Change

One of the basic observations among language change theorists is that it is much harder to determine whether or not a language change has taken place in spoken language compared to written language. The spoken language changes fast and it varies, depending on, for example where you live, your age or your education. The written language, however, changes more slowly and does not vary to the same extent as the spoken language. But if you want to examine change in spoken language it is often rewarding to look at general changes in society. If one can connect the language change to changes in society it is easier to trace how the change occurred [Einarsson 2004 : 226]. Language change reflects changes in society more now than, for example, 300 years ago. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century European societies were more static in general. The people in power in society continued having power for a long time, and the power was often inherited within the family or the group. The people without power stayed without power and without chance of ever changing their situation. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century society changed and became more open and agile and the possibility to change the life situation became easier [Ahlgren 1978 : 20]. But if one focuses on the connection between changes in society and language change there are some details in society that cannot be overlooked, for example the fact that a society often consists of groups of people with different status. Language change is always due to the fact that different influences affect different groups of people, and if a language use is going to become accepted it usually have to start with, or be picked up by, a high prestige group. Very often, language use is connected to the dialects of specific social groups, for example young people, or academics, and it will start there before reaching out to the rest. When a new language use is introduced it will first be used for some time by the creators and then reach out to the rest of the language users. Within language change theory this development is seen as two different stages; innovation, which will happen within a specific group, and language change, which means that the new language has become a part of the standard language [Labov 1972 : 178 – 180].

Within language change research, the so-called “s-curve of diffusion” [Chen 1972] is often used in order to illustrate how a language change is being spread. The curve is mainly used for describing the rate of sound change and how the sound changes are being integrated with the different words, but it gives a good image of how many people are actually starting to use the new language.



The curve consists of three different stages. The first stage, A, shows a minor change, and that the new language is being used within a small group of people. In the next stage, B, the curve goes up strongly, which means that the new language use reaches out to a larger number of people. In the final stage, C, the new language use has been adapted by most people and only a small number of people are using it for the first time.

The language change that I want to focus on in this article is the change of use of Swedish personal pronouns. Two of the leading researchers, when it comes to pronouns and how these can be used, are Roger Brown and Albert Gilman. These researchers discuss pronouns as words that can suggest institutional or group authority, so-called *pronouns of power*, or words that can create a sense of closeness between people, so-called *pronouns of solidarity*. Pronouns of power can be for example to refer to oneself as "we" or "us" in order to create an image that more people than you stand behind the ideas you want to promote. In the same way you can use pronouns of solidarity, for example "we" or "us" in order to make the other person feel that you are on the same level and agree with each other [Brown & Gilman 1960]. In 1965 Brown compared a number of European languages and the use of personal pronouns in those languages, and he made an interesting discovery. It seemed that the languages he had compared (for example French, Italian and German) all used the second person pronoun singular downwards when there was a status difference between the speakers, but within a group, where all speakers had the same status and where the speakers had confidence in each other, the same pronoun, the second person pronoun singular,

was used. The more polite pronoun, the one that was used in order to show respect upwards, to someone with a higher status, was always used in groups where the people had different status and did not know each other. Brown's conclusion was that along with the status norm another norm often develops, one that is based on solidarity. Between equals and groups consisting of people with confidence in each other, there is a need for an informal personal pronoun [Brown 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2003]. Personal pronouns certainly play a key role when it comes to marking status and friendship among people in a society.

### 3. Background to the Change of *Ni*

The use of Swedish personal pronouns has changed many times, and in order to understand the change that occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century one has to go back to the Swedish Middle Ages. At that time Sweden was influenced in many ways by the Latin language. One of the changes that occurred during this time was that the Swedes started to use the second person plural pronoun *I* (in English : you)<sup>1</sup> as a polite address pronoun for addressing someone with higher social status. The Swedish upper class started using this pronoun when they addressed each other in order to show mutual respect, but when speaking to lower classes they would use the second person singular (English *you*, Swedish *du*). The lower classes however only used *I* when speaking to someone with a higher status. When addressing each other, within the group, they used *du* [Ahlgren 1978 : 17]. So the upper class used *du* when talking to someone from a lower class and *I* when talking to someone from their own class, while the lower classes used *I* when talking to someone from the upper class and *du* when talking to someone from their own class. In this way the address system became asymmetric and made it very clear what status everybody had in society [Brown & Gilman 1960].

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Swedish forms of address went through another change and the title system was introduced. This meant that instead of using pronouns when addressing someone, one used the person's title, like Doctor *Nilsson* or Count *Sjöström*. In spite of the fact that this new title system had a great impact on the Swedish language, the use of *I* survived and soon changed into what was considered a more relaxed and spoken version, *ni*<sup>2</sup>. These two systems of address existed together, with different tasks. The most polite way of addressing someone was to use the title, but in those cases when one did not know a person's title the pronoun *ni* was used. At the

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1 The Swedish pronunciation of *I* is very similar to the pronunciation of the English *ee*.

2 The Swedish pronunciation of *ni* is very similar to the pronunciation of the English *nee*.

same time the groups with lower status in society continued using the pronoun *du* within the group [Ahlgren 1978 : 46].

Just like in Brown's study [Brown 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2003], the Swedish upper class felt a need for a less formal personal pronoun within the group, a pronoun that would show social closeness and solidarity. The upper class started using *du* within the group. This led to *ni* developing into a pronoun which did not only show respect, but also marked distance in general. The same personal pronoun could have many different meanings depending on how it was used. The second person pronoun singular, *du*, marked disrespect when used downwards, but solidarity among equals. The second person pronoun plural, *ni*, showed reverence when used upwards, but distance among equals [Ahlgren 1978 : 18]. Because of the second person pronoun plural's development into a distance making pronoun, the word finally, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, turned into as a distance maker downwards. *Ni* became a negative address pronoun [Ahlgren 1978 : 78, 79].

So at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a great uncertainty among Swedes as to how they should address each other. The title system still existed and was considered the most polite choice, but when addressing someone whose title one did not know, the pronoun *ni* had become difficult. Since it had become a distance marker downwards it had of course become a very impolite word to use. All of this led to a *ni*-reformation. Especially the upper class and the academics felt the need for a clear address pronoun system, and tried very hard to reinstall the polite use of *ni*, but it was in vain. *Du* had already won ground among the ordinary people, and it seemed impossible to wash off the bad connotations of *ni* [Einarsson 2004 : 131, 132].

#### 4. The *du*-reformation

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the labor movement grew strong, with equality as one of the most important issues. They wanted the old hierarchical system to change, and the old forms of address became symbols of the past, but the tradition was deeply ingrained and there were many people fighting against change, so the use of titles survived for quite some time during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. People still tried to avoid having to choose between *du* and *ni*. *Du* was still too intimate and *ni* felt condescending. But the title system was troublesome and felt strained in many situations, especially when one needed to repeat the title several times in one sentence (for example "Professor Nilsson needs to finish Professor Nilsson's meal if Professor Nilsson wants to make it in time") [Språkriktighetsboken 2005 : 127, 128].

In the 1930's the attempts to reinstall *ni* still went on, and the *ni* spokespersons had some influential people on their side. Erik Wellander, a Swedish language professor,

and the author of the leading handbook of the Swedish language in the 1930's, *Riktig svenska* (the title in English would be *Correct Swedish*) joined the form-of-address debate in the first edition of his book [1939] and he tried to wash off the bad reputation of *ni*, suggesting that the title system ought to be the main system and when one does not know the addressee one should use *ni*. In a later edition [1973] he wrote that *ni* was winning ground in the 1930's, but after the second world war "there was a sudden setback" [117]. Citizens conscripted into the Swedish army had got used to using *du* as the general form of address, and this was, according to Wellander, the beginning of the end, a country where people use the same personal pronoun with everyone – high or low, friend or foe.

Eva Mårtensson, a researcher at Lund University, agrees with Wellander's opinion that it was the military groups that started the wider spread of the pronoun *du*. She writes that within these groups the use of *du* became common, and these military groups' status became higher and higher the closer the war came. But they were not alone. Also groups within the sport movement started to use this pronoun, which had a great impact on many young people at the time. One of the greatest landmarks in the *du*-reformation was when Bror Rexed became the president of the National Medical Committee in 1967, and announced that he was going to address everybody with *du* and expected everybody to do the same to him. He was a highly respected man with a high position in society, and his decision to introduce *du* as the only address pronoun among those who were working in the same committee became front-page news all over Sweden. After this many authorities and large companies started conducting language planning by enforcing *du* as the only address pronoun among the employees, and along with this the surnames started to be replaced by first names. It was considered a democratic no-nonsense form of address, one that was based on solidarity [Mårtensson 1987 : 29]. During this time the labor movement's largest party, *Socialdemokraterna* (The Social Democrats) had become the leading party. The address pronoun question had been a central issue for the party for a very long time, so many of the party's highly placed politicians took the opportunity and spoke out in TV and announced that *du* was the only correct address pronoun and that the time of titles and hierarchical pronouns had passed [Mårtensson 1987 : 29, 30]. If you put the address pronoun *du* into the s-curve of diffusion you could see that the first stage, A, is the stage when the word is being picked up by military and sport groups, and stage B is when the word becomes accepted by language users in general in Sweden, especially after Bror Rexed's influence, and stage C is in the 1960's, when the word finally becomes a part of standard Swedish.

So it took until the 1960's before *du* was generally used. In one way you could say

that it was no reformation, but a change from below. It was the ordinary people who started using the pronoun, and it spread from there. But it was a change that came together with political change, a time when the Labor Movement started to take over and the use of address pronoun became a symbol for which side you were standing on [Einarsson 2004 : 132].

## 5. The Present – Backlash or Progress ?

At the end of the 1970's, the pronoun *du* was generally used, in daily life, at work, in politics etc. The use of *du* had become a natural way of addressing people. I remember a situation in my early teens (1980's) when I went to visit an acquaintance of my father's. It was a rich old Swedish lady, who fully believed that the *du*-reformation was the beginning of the end for Sweden. She used to be an important person, she had high status, and she refused to be addressed with a simple *du*. My father told me all this, and I went to see her with the intention of not using *du* so as not to hurt her feelings only to realize that I could not speak Swedish if I was not allowed to use the second person pronoun. I had no training in addressing people with titles and I did not understand how to use *ni*. *Du* was such a natural part of my language that I did not know how to speak without it.

Because of the fact that the pronoun *du* had won such a victory, and was used by the majority of the population, the return of *ni* in the middle of the 1980's came as a shock to many people. Suddenly one could experience being addressed with *ni* at the bank, in the supermarket, in the clothing store and other places within the service sector. It was of course a gradual change, but it spread fast, and it did not take many years until the people working within the service sector used *ni* more than *du*. There are many theories as to why *ni* came back into the Swedish language. Some researchers think that there might be a universal need to be able to express intimacy and distance through language, and that the lack of a formal personal pronoun in a language could create a feeling that this need was not fulfilled [Einarsson 2004 : 133]. There are also theories that the reason has to do with economics. In the 1960's Sweden went through an economic upswing and the period is characterized by a general belief in good times and a prosperous future. But the image of a prosperous Sweden changed in the 1980's when the people in Sweden experienced a recession and the future became more uncertain. This change might have caused *ni* to come back. But the major theory is that the change was due to the increased popularity of studying foreign languages at school during the 1960's and 1970's. Many students became familiar with the use of polite pronouns while studying, for example, German or French and felt that the Swedish language failed to fill the need of addressing someone by a distinctly

formal pronoun [Mårtensson 1987 : 30]. After Sweden joined the European Union in 1995 the opportunity to study and work in other European countries increased and many young Swedish people use for example French or German much more now than 50 years ago. It is only natural that the languages one uses would affect one's way of thinking and self-expression.

So while there are many theories as to why the old address pronoun was picked up by young Swedes in the 1980's, one thing is certain : the meaning of the word *ni* had evolved. *Ni* was now used as a polite address pronoun, a word without negative connotations, from the users' point of view. The use of the pronoun was limited, almost entirely, to the service sector, and the users' intention was probably to create a more polite environment so that the customers would feel that they were well treated (and would spend more money). But for many people this development had the opposite effect. Older people were very disturbed by the return of *ni*, a word that for them was only impolite and condescending. In the Letters to the Editor columns in Swedish newspapers, a long debate began between those who felt that *ni* held negative connotations and the younger generation who did not understand this and were only trying to be polite. Many people who were addressed with *ni* in shops and stores became angry and hurt, feeling that the struggle for equality had been in vain [Mårtensson 1986 : 49].

The debate between *du*-users and *ni*-users is still going strong in Sweden today, 2008. Many people still feel that *ni* is a negative word because of its condescending and distance-creating connotations. There is a certain pride when it comes to the *du*-reformation and a feeling that the use of a non-hierarchical form of address has become a kind of symbol for Swedish culture and the Swedish political system, a symbol of equality. But when you put the issue in its proper perspective, and look at the history behind the *du/ni* development, it all seems to be a question of generational misunderstanding. The people who started to use the new *ni* have no intention of re-installing the old Swedish hierarchical system. The fact that this is a trend that is strictly limited to the service sector proves that the intention is not to offend someone, but to make people feel better. The intention is to be polite, and the inspiration is most certainly other European languages, and not the old status system. It does not work that well however. Many people still feel uncomfortable being addressed with *ni* and the intended politeness is perceived as impolite.

But the chances that this trend is going to affect the Swedish language in the long run must be considered low. It is possible that it will be a permanent element in the service sector, but it will most likely never spread outside this sector to a greater extent. A use of *ni* outside this sector would be, at least now in 2008, considered very

affected and strange. But the fact that the use of personal pronouns is still being discussed and that the pronouns still provoke strong emotions in Sweden suggests that this is not an issue that is going to be easily resolved. If I had to answer Andersson's initial question again, I might answer that one of the most typical Swedish traits is this constant discussion about how we should address one other.

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