

Contrasting Fortunes of European Leaders Attempting to Use the T-Form of Address in Public During State Visits

Marina Vazanova^{1,*}

¹ University of Economics in Bratislava, Bratislava, Slovakia

*Corresponding author. Email: marina.vazanova@euba.sk

ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of T and V forms of communication. We explain the historical and psychological reasons why Russians are wary of T as a form of communication. We give examples of European Leaders and their choice of T and V forms when addressing others, in private and in public, which go beyond traditional norms. The reaction of the Russian media to the use of the T form by Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel when addressing President Vladimir Putin is contrasted with the reaction to French President Emanuel Macron when he also attempts to introduce the T form of address. All this suggests that, although T form of address may be common between politicians in private, the V-V form of address is the safest strategy if third person interlocutors are present, except in very special circumstances.

Keywords: *T and V forms of address, Speech etiquette, European Leaders, Diplomatic behaviour, Intercultural communication, Discursive approach.*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is known that relations between heads of state and their representatives are regulated by diplomatic protocol, reflecting the basic rules of diplomatic behaviour: politeness, simplicity, dignity, and good manners. These protocols are not legally binding, but their observance is an unwritten law for all countries.

Despite their universal basis, international protocols have national specificity, conditioned by historical traditions, culture, ideology. Differences in mentalities and national characters; mismatched linguistic pictures of the world; influence of cultural stereotypes; differences in value orientations; mismatched cultural and linguistic norms; errors in the perception of humour; differences in communication strategies; specific forms and means of nonverbal communication can lead to cultural misunderstandings [1]. «Cultural mistakes ... are perceived much more painfully and cause a more negative reaction than linguistic mistakes» [2].

To avoid these cultural mistakes, it is key to understand the participants and where, when, and for what reasons cultural conflicts could arise. The

ability to accurately use T and V forms of address is especially important not only for the act of communication itself, but also for assessing the relationship of interlocutors, and in the case of political figures, for accurately understanding the attitude of political leaders.

Why is the choice of forms of address so important especially for the first persons of states? Because they are a complex sign-text that is embedded in the social and historical experience of the communicants. It is a nationally marked text, which has its own content and addressee. This sign-text is not just understood by a Russian, but it is recognized by him, as it is known to him in advance [3]. It should be borne in mind that this sign-text is recognized and evaluated based on a broad historical, traditional, and ideological context.

In this article we use the *discursive approach* to study T and V forms of communication. That is, we study each specific text, «taking into account the social situation in which it was created, its relationship to other texts, the target settings, political views and personal qualities of the author, the specifics of this text perception by different people,

as well as the role that this text can play in the system of political texts and - more generally - in the political life of the country» [4].

2. THE NEED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN T AND V FORMS OF ADDRESS IN RUSSIAN POLITICAL ETIQUETTE

The use of Russian T (*ты*) and V (*вы*) forms of address can be described in terms of the norms and rules of their use. The basic rule is that even if high-ranking people speak to each other in private by *ты*, they should use the word *вы* in public. This is an unspoken agreement, of which, of course, both interlocutors are aware. This is to avoid demonstrating an off-duty relationship, or familiarity in order to show mutual respect to those around them.

For Russians, choosing between *ты* and *вы* is quite usual, because in business, as well as in private life, this happens every day. Colleagues communicate by *ты* with each other when they are just two of them, but when a third person appears, by default, they switch to *вы*. Typically, a foreigner who does not belong to the Russian culture will struggle to make this choice.

This is even truth when the foreigners' native language uses T and V forms (e.g. German and French). This is because the Russian language etiquette can be asymmetrical unlike the equivalent etiquettes in other cultures [5]. In Russian, communication can use, in specific circumstances, combinations of either T-V or V-T. We discuss examples of these specific circumstances in this article.

3. IMPROPER USE OF ТЫ («ТЫКАНЬЕ»: DEDICATED RUSSIAN VERB TO DESCRIBE THIS BEHAVIOUR)

The improper use of *ты*, either as a sign of familiarity or to attempt to impose authority, is important enough in the Russian language that there is a dedicated verb for this behaviour: «тыканье».

When asked what elements of Western etiquette Russians are not yet prepared to accept, linguist Maxim Krongauz, in one of his interviews with journalists of the Harvard Business Review Russia, was clear: the pro-Western, or rather pro-English tendency to address interlocutors as *ты*. Even if this is seen as "proof that our society is less democratic" [6]. For the Russian person, addressing by *ты* in

business communication always emphasizes superiority, the imposition of one's authority.

One explanation for this can be found in Russia's recent historical past. Russians lived in a totalitarian state, where the manipulation of power was hidden under the friendly *ты* address to the people. For example, during the days of terror after the October Revolution, everyone was told to switch to *ты*, call each other by name. The totalitarian state thus erased the personality and humiliated the individual in order to impose certain duties, thoughts, and actions on him. Thus, *ты* forms have become the ideologemes of totalitarian discourse.

Familiarity is regarded as one of the most widespread and severe types of manipulation, because it hides under a mask of friendliness. This is also the opinion of psychologists, who warn us against falling into this trap and advise us to distance ourselves from people who use *ты* without knowing us. People who compulsively «тыкают».

Psychologists explain that by referring to us on the first name without any special reasons, i.e. by transferring oneself into the status of our friend, "our interlocutor seems to demonstrate his friendliness, but in fact he instantly makes himself a crowned man, a wise man of life and a great hero, but we, accordingly lose our positions... This is a manipulation of power, when you find yourself in the power of a man who will turn to you with requests such as "go and get it", "give", and in general, Masha, it's nothing, no big deal, I pushed you or hit, we are after all buddies" [7].

Another reason for caution when using *ты*-communication in business is that there is also the so-called right of the strongman: "a person with a strong position in business can dictate his terms to partners, including in terms/his terms of etiquette" [6]. That is, there is a position that if a politician is able to impose his etiquette rules of communication, or at least defend his rules, such as not giving in to the *ты*-talk of the interlocutor, he will take the lead in the negotiation process and will be listened to.

4. VLADIMIR PUTIN AND ANGELA MERKEL: USING T AND V FORMS

The relationship between the leaders of Germany and Russia, Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Vladimir Putin, deserves special attention.

They met long before Angela Merkel became Chancellor of Germany, but they have been

particularly close over the past 16 years. They both speak each other's native languages.

Angela Merkel is seen in many countries, including Russia and Germany, as a mediator between Europe and Moscow, especially when it comes to trying to resolve the Ukrainian crisis. Speaking about the establishment of contacts between Russia and Ukraine, one of the political analysts L.Y. Gozman noted that, if necessary, Mrs Merkel is one of the few people through whom Vladimir Putin can pass a secret message to Zelensky.¹ That is why many are convinced of the close and trusting relationship that has developed between the two leaders.

It is clear that during private conversations or official meetings in private (behind closed doors) they address each other using *ты*. During a press conference (August 2018), after being shouted down with an additional question by a journalist, Angela Merkel was overheard simply saying to Vladimir Putin «*Пошли*» (cf. as «*Пошлите*» when speaking *Вы*). The remark was good-natured and, despite her use the T form, did not generate any negative reaction. On another occasion, Angela Merkel asked Vladimir Putin simply, «*Он с тобой говорит по-русски?*»² ("Does he speak Russian to you?"), referring to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, who turned out to have greeted V. Putin in Russian. These words only suggest that Angela Merkel and Vladimir Putin have developed a friendly relationship over the years that allows them to call each other *ты* in private.

Normally it is a different matter when it comes to public communication. Political protocol would dictate the use of *Вы*.

However, Mrs Merkel purposely ignored convention during her farewell visit to Moscow as Chancellor. At a press conference on August 20, 2021, she repeatedly addressed Vladimir Putin by either *ты* or with his first name «... *Ты уже упомянул о Ливии, о конференции в Ливии ... Ты упомянул год Германии в России, который проводится в настоящее время*» ("... you already mentioned about Libya, about the conference in Libya ... You mentioned the year of Germany in Russia, which is currently held") and even called him

by the name «*Дорогой Владимир*» ("dear Vladimir")³ in the beginning.

Note that, throughout this exchange, V. Putin continued to use the V form. This is an example of the asymmetric nature of the T-V form which is unique to Russian. Such verbal behaviour on the part of Mrs. Merkel should not be regarded as an oversight, because it is well known that Germans attach great importance to the ability to conduct themselves in society. The observance of the rules of politeness and courtesy in some areas of official communication, including the address in *ты* (*du*) and *Вы* (*Sie*), is regulated by the German constitution, at the legislative level. Mrs. Merkel deliberately departed from protocol when addressing Mr. Putin as *ты*, thus demonstrating the change in the status of their relationship (from official to friendly).

This is a case where the situation turns out to be more important than the standard dictated by protocol. The choice of pronouns changes: albeit for a limited time and in a certain situation.

How did their respective public react to this? From the point of view of German business etiquette, this was quite acceptable. The use of *ты* (*du*) in German business language is often a sign of similarity between two or more people. It is a sign of reducing social distance – it is what Kallmeyer called "gemeinsame Lebenswelt" [8], that is, perceived shared experiences and perceived similarities between individuals, including common interests or views, political and ideological positions. In addition, German etiquette, unlike, for example, French etiquette, follows the English etiquette in striving for increasing universality and moving more and more away from *Вы* (*Sie*) communication.

However, for the Russian public this fragment of the press conference was adjusted in accordance with the etiquette norms currently accepted in Russian society. Otherwise, it could have been seen by the Russian audience, at best, as a communicative misstep in the form of an inappropriate demonstration of friendly relations in public, and at worst, as familiarity or manipulation of power. The media was not tasked with emphasizing either of these issues.

For all its regulation, Russian political discourse does allow for the use of T forms of address. There are no such clear rules, but we can talk about the existence of certain conditions. We mean the emergence of that non-standard situation in which,

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDyvGcPKofU> [25.12.2021]

2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJ6zksxug1M&t=132s> [25.12.2021]

3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vq9gMfEEXZI> [25.12.2021]

when the general context changes in order to convey a certain coded message, T-formula is allowed as a sign-text, which will be recognized and therefore understood by the Russian audience, to whom it is addressed.

A prime example is Vladimir Putin's December 8, 2021 farewell telegram to Angela Merkel. Here it must be said that Vladimir Putin has never before been on a *ты*-basis with Mrs. Merkel in public. We must give credit to his political wisdom, namely his ability to refrain from flaunting his close relationship with the Chancellor. In situations of public communication, when he addressed all other heads of state as *Вы*, he addressed Mrs. Merkel as *Вы* as well, at least it always looked natural.

In his farewell telegram to Angela Merkel in connection with the end of her term as German Chancellor, Vladimir Putin deliberately goes against these rules, as the markers/indicators of their relationship are changed, and for the first time publicly addresses her by *ты*: *«За годы пребывания во главе германского правительства ты по праву снискала высокий авторитет в Европе и по всему миру. Уверен, что твой богатый опыт государственного деятеля и политика будет неизменно востребован...»*.⁴ ("Over the years at the head of the German government you have rightly earned a high reputation in Europe and around the world. I am sure that your vast experience as a statesman and politician will always be in demand..."). While in his congratulatory telegram to Olof Scholz on the occasion of assuming the office of Federal Chancellor he addressed him as *Вы*, as is protocol: *«... Рассчитываю на налаживание с Вами конструктивного диалога и совместной работы по актуальным вопросам двусторонней и международной повестки дня»*.⁵ ("... I look forward to establishing with you a constructive dialogue and working together on topical issues of the bilateral and international agenda").

By the way, the friendly tone of V. Putin's telegram to Mrs Merkel did not go unnoticed by many media outlets, including the Ukrainian ones. For example, journalist Dmitry Gordon reacted rather sharply to the fact that "Putin addressed Merkel by *ты*" and, in a live interview with the Ekho Moskvy radio station, stated that he would not be surprised "if

Angela Merkel soon finds a job at Gazprom," which confused even seasoned Ekho Moskvy journalists, and then added, "... that ... she has always weakly defended the interests of Ukraine, she has always followed the Russian fairway (was influenced by Russia)," and the explanation is her "Komsomol past and fear of Putin, who once scared the dog out of her".⁶ Here Mr. Gordon left out another detail that his Western colleagues never forget when they remind about Vladimir Putins influence to Angela Merkel - traditional bouquets of flowers, in which they always see a political context: a display of warm feelings, an attempt to confuse the Chancellor ... or a deliberate provocation.⁷

5. «WHEN YOU ARE IN ROME, DO AS THE ROMANS» OR «HOW EMANUEL MACRON VIOLATED DIPLOMATIC PROTOCOL»

Politicians from different states representing different cultures can cause tensions in relations if they choose the wrong pronoun. It is known that greetings set the tone for subsequent communication. In Russia they say, "As the beginning, so the end" (A good beginning makes a good ending). It will be difficult to build a productive dialogue, built on the principles of equality, if initially one of the interlocutors establishes, or tries to establish, their superiority over the other. But it happens a lot. Some leaders of states show particular zeal in doing so.

Let us turn to one example when French President Emanuel Macron chooses the simple and seemingly so familiar word «Привет»⁸ to greet the Russian President. The embarrassed expression on V. Putin's face suggests that this form of greeting in public was inappropriate, to say the least. Although President Macron probably wished to demonstrate a friendly disposition to President Putin, unfortunately it does not coincide at all with the Russian idea of the word «Привет», which, by the way, is by no means a full equivalent of the English "Hi", because «Привет» is much narrower in meaning and in its use, and it is certainly not suitable for greeting a head of state.

With such a greeting the addressee introduces not only himself, but also his interlocutor. It is as if he makes his interlocutor hostage to his cultural mistake.

4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUuhNN-fcnY&list=WL&index=89&ab_channel=%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F24 [25.12.2021]

5. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUuhNN-fcnY&list=WL&index=89&ab_channel=%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F24 [25.12.2021]

6. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tywfh5U_S5k&t=1740s&ab_channel=%D0%AD%D1%85%D0%BE%D0%9C%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B2%D1%8B [25.12.2021]

7. <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2603747>

8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIVCQFr3BV&t=7s>

But even if one tries to explain the French President's chosen form of greeting by saying that it was a desire to show his friendship with Vladimir Putin, the pat on V. Putin's shoulder that ensued erases any possibility of that happening. In Russian culture such behaviour can only be explained as a demonstration of his leading role in the dialogue and an attempt to establish superiority. All the more so in the apologetic words that followed the unfortunate greeting, «*Прости, что я заставил тебя ждать. Мы просто должны были договорить о последних положениях, касающихся климатических изменений*»⁹ ("I'm sorry I kept you waiting. We just had to talk about the latest provisions on climate change") the special connoisseurs of the Russian speech etiquette can also see the elements of the mentor style of communication. After all, there is a more polite apologetic phrase for being late than «*Я заставил тебя ждать*» ("I made you wait"), which is «*Тебе пришлось меня подождать*» ("You had to wait for me").

The Russian journalists, who witnessed this exchange, presented Emanuel Macron to the Russian audience in a mocking boyish way, pulling up his socks, reinforcing the picture with the comment "Macron was in such a hurry to see Putin, that his socks slipped down. He was too late for the negotiations". Putin's response to Macron's greeting and excuses sounded like a mockery; he assessed the talks that Macron was late for as idle chitchat: "I hope the collective climate will be better now. You discussed it - everything will be fine. Although the reasons for the climate change are not yet known, frankly ..."¹⁰

6. CONCLUSION

One of the specific features of political communication is the need to choose between T and V forms of communication. Today the appropriate *ты*, during diplomats' and politicians' private conversations, can express trustworthiness, friendliness, and closeness, while *Вы* expresses, above all, politeness, respect, appreciation and formality.

But as soon as a third interlocutor (audience) appears, the sign-text, and hence the forms of addressing politicians to each other, change. The

transition from *ты* to *Вы* with the appearance of the third interlocutor is perceived as an etiquette norm, which is applied not only to the heads of the states but also to any participant of formal communication. However, there are exceptions which can be allowed.

We have tried to demonstrate this by describing the successful use of the T form by Angela Merkel and Vladimir Putin. Note the asymmetry in *ты* and *Вы* choice during some of the exchanges. Note also that, despite their warm relations being well known in Russia, the media purposely reported her words using the V form to ensure Mrs. Merkel was not misunderstood.

In contrast President Macron, without any of the history or warm relations with Vladimir Putin, also attempted to use the T form.

This not only visibly surprised Vladimir Putin but prompted a veiled response which Russian media took as an invitation to mock the French President.

The lesson is clear: when a third person is present it is safest for politicians to use the V form except in very special circumstances.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Marina Vazanova.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The translations for this paper were done with the assistance of Thomas Collins, MA (Cantab).

REFERENCES

- [1] Frick, T.B. Fundamentals of Intercultural Communication Theory. – Tomsk: Tomsk Polytechnic University Press, 2013. – 100 p., pp. 75–76.
- [2] Ter-Minasova, S.G. War and Peace of Languages and Cultures: Issues of Theory and Practice of Interlanguage and Intercultural Communication. – Moscow: Slovo/Slovo, 2008. – 343 p., pp.68.
- [3] Goldin, V.E. Addressing: theoretical problems. – Moscow: Book House LIBROCOM, 2009. – 136 p., pp.78.
- [4] Chudinov, A. P. The political narrative and political discourse // Linguistics: Bulletin of the Ural Linguistic Society. – Ekaterinburg, 2002. Vol. 8. pp. 128–135, p.129.

9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIvCQFr3BV&t=7s>

10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIvCQFr3BV&t=7s>

- [5] Krongauz M.A. Speech Etiquette: Politeness and Communication Strategies – URL: <https://www.coursera.org/lecture/rechevoj-etiket/niekotoryie-itoghi-i-utochnieniia-Kd17b> [25.12.2021]
- [6] Natitnik, A. Maxim Krongauz: "Why we don't say hello". 9 August 2013 – URL: <https://hbr-russia.ru/biznes-i-obshchestvo/etika-i-reputatsiya/a12410> [25.12.2021]
- [7] Kiryanova, A. Don't let yourself be called 'ТЫ' – URL: <https://is.gd/FxCSbh> [25.12.2021]
- [8] Kallmeyer, W. Please call me you (du). The interview was conducted by C. Schmitt // Die Zeit 27. July 2, 2003 – URL: http://www.zeit.de/2003/27/Alltag_2fDuzen_27 [25.12.2021]