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Terms of endearment

An observational study on how strangers are addressed in Northern Ireland and Ireland

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Abstract

Titel: Terms of endearment: A study on how strangers are addressed in Northern Ireland and Ireland

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to find out whether terms of endearment are used by native speakers of English while addressing strangers and if so, what are the reasons? Another aspect is if they use familiar body language while addressing a stranger. This study was carried out based on a number of observations in Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Since the aim of the study was to see why terms of endearments are used the researcher needed the help of a male observer to see if the reasons were gender related. Nine restaurants of different social class were visited, nine stores of different social class, the observers spoke to nine taxi drivers, they visited nine hotels of different social class; and asked nine people for directions in the street.

The results showed that no young people addressed either of the observers with terms of endearment. There was no difference in social class. There was a big difference in how the male and the female observer were addressed by people over the age of 40. While the male observer was addressed very polite, the female observer was addressed with a very informal speech were the participants used terms of endearments such as “love” and touched her on the shoulder.

Nyckelord: Terms of endearment, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Observations
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1. Introduction

A term of endearment is a way of showing affection for another person, and English has many terms that are used for that purpose. Words like “babe” or “honey” are usually used among boyfriends and girlfriends (BBC language, 2009). Terms like “love”, “pet”, or “dear” are most often used within the family by parent speaking to their children. There is also the term “mate” that is most often used among friends. In English speaking countries these kinds of terms can also be used among people who are in fact strangers. An example of terms of endearment in England is “love” but in north of England it is “pet” (BBC language, 2009). The use of these words creates a friendly atmosphere and the body language often enhances this (BBC language, 2009).

The way two people communicate can depend on many different factors such as social class or their age. Religion can also be one aspect. There is also social distance to take into consideration. This is similar to a geographical distance in the sense that people in a higher social group might have a different speech culture than people of a lower class (Trudgill, 2000: 24).

The purpose of this paper is to see whether native speakers of English still use terms of endearment while addressing strangers and if they do, what are the reasons? Another aim to determine is if they use familiar body language while addressing a stranger.

In order to find answers to these questions an observational study was performed in Northern Ireland and Ireland.
2. Background

2.1 History of terms of address

In Elizabethan society people started to become unsure how to address other people. A term like gentleman used to be a way of addressing a man with social privileges, such as one who owned land and only used with those of a very high social status. During this period, however, people started to achieve social status through education and a gentleman could mean a person who could make a living with the help of his education without having to own any land (Leith, 1997: 67).

Since society was starting to change people became insecure as to who was to be called a gentleman or a master. This might be one reason, according to Leith (1997) that people started to use new terms of address because they needed to state their social status. It was no longer only land owners that could be called gentlemen. People started to label others by, for instance, their professions (Leith, 1997: 67). In Shakespeare’s plays the way of addressing someone in a formal gathering was by using that persons profession such as “cook” or to state a relationship they would say “wife” (Leith, 1997: 68).

Elizabethan practice regarding terms of address is still seen in the English language. Nowadays a title before a last name is used to show that the person who is addressing somebody wants to be polite. The usage of terms of endearment is to state a closer relationship, for instance, a term like “mate” is used when somebody wants to be friendly.

The way native speakers address other people is, according to Leith, dependent on social status and what group a person belongs to (1997: 68).

2.1.1 The use of personal pronouns and social class

During the middle ages pronouns were used as a way of stating people’s social class and therefore used as a way of showing respect for other people. Upper class people used familiar pronouns when talking to people of lower class. While upper class people used polite pronouns among themselves, lower class used familiar pronouns among themselves (Trudgill, 2000: 91). Many years ago, pronouns like ”you” were used as a polite way of addressing another person while in closer relationships the pronoun ”thou” was used more often (Bratt, Paulston, & Tucker, 2003: 156).
2.1.1.1 The solidarity factor

As mentioned above, during medieval times upper class people used the familiar pronoun to a person of a lower class in order to emphasise that they were superior to this particular person (Trudgill, 2000: 90-91). Research by Brown and Gilman (in Bratt, Paulston & Tucker, 2003: 165) led to the formulation of a factor, called the ‘solidarity factor’. This was not something that happened over night but actually something that developed during a long period of time with many things contributing. One thing was the French revolution. In 1793, the committee of public safety condemned the power semantic, which was, ‘vous’ because it was considered to be an ancient way of stating power over people. They ordered a universal form of address considered to be less formal, ‘tu’. This way of addressing people stayed on for a few years but later the power semantic came back into society.

Brown and Gilman conducted a number of questionnaire studies in several European countries which gave the result that in France people found it to be in bad taste to use the low status pronoun to a waiter at a restaurant because it implied that the customer was of higher status than the waiter. This factor made people aware of the negative aspects of demonstrating power over people by using specific pronouns because formal way of address was considered to be very old fashioned and modern men and women’s ideology is to go along with the modern world and way of speaking (Bratt, Paulston & Tucker, 2003: 165). The so-called solidarity factor led to a change in the usage of pronouns and nowadays the polite pronoun is used in several countries among people who are not intimate with each other, and the familiar pronoun is used among people that have a close relationship (Trudgill 2000: 91).

2.1.1.2 Family hierarchies

During the middle ages pronouns were used as a way of demonstrating power over people. This could be seen particularly within families. A child would not call his or her father by their first name because a father was the highest in rank in a family hierarchy. In those days the father of a family was seen as a king or an emperor of this small group. It was therefore inappropriate to address a parent with the familiar pronoun (Bratt, Paulston, & Tucker, 2003: 158).

2.2 Social reasons for using certain terms of endearment

2.2.1 Age

A person’s way of communicating with others can depend on their age. This mean that there can be a generation explanation why some people use terms of endearment. Myers (2005)
gives two different reasons for this. The first one is a life cycle explanation. This means that as a person ages their attitudes change: This means that people might grow up with one way of looking at society but will change the way they see the same society as they grow up and get more life experience. The second one is the generation explanation. This means that people tend not to change their attitudes and behaviour from when they were young. According to this explanation, people stick to the same way of behaving as others did at that particular point in time. This means that there will be a big difference in the way an older generation communicates compared to the young generation of today (Myers, 2005: 267).

2.2.2 Culture of the family
Children are very likely to copy the behaviour of their parents. They learn from them and adopt their behaviour (Passer-Smith, 2007: 417-418). If a parent exhibits antisocial behaviour, the child is in the risk zone to copy this behaviour and develop such behaviour as they grow up. Parents influence their children in many ways, for instance, the way they reason about things and the way they think about things (Passer-Smith, 2007: 417-418). Depending on the culture of the family and their way of addressing people, a child might continue to use polite language or terms of endearment when speaking to other people in the way that their parents spoke to them.

Since the first encounter a child has with language is the family, it is possible that having learned to address his or her parents using polite language, he or she will be likely to carry on with this in future life (Bratt, Paulston & Tucker, 2003: 158).

2.3 Gender
When children start to talk, they develop gender identities. Depending on if they are male or female, they will communicate differently. This is something a child will learn because their parent will speak to them in a particular way according to their gender (Stewart et al. 2003: 4-5). As the children grow up these differences will become more visible. There are for example differences between men’s and women’s use of vocabulary. Women tend to use more descriptive adjectives when they speak such as “divine”, “precious” and “fantastic”. Women also use more descriptive words for colours such as “beige” or “lavender” (Wardhaug, 1998: 312).
2.3.1 Reasons for why men and women are addressed in different ways

In some English speaking cultures men and women are addressed in different ways. A woman is more often addressed by her first name or a nickname than a man is. Moreover it is common to use words such as “dear” or “babe” to a woman (Wardhaug 1998: 314). When it comes to nicknames, men receive more and these nicknames are often words with an –o ending such as “Jocko” or words like “dude” while nicknames addressing women often have got an –ie or -y ending such as “sweetie” or “honey” (Stewart et al. 2003: 54).

Since men have had the most influence in society throughout history, they have been able to control communication in a way that has led to the language containing many positive words to describe men. There is also a male influence on how some words for professions are words in the masculine form at first with a derived form for the feminine (Stewart et al. 2003: 53). These are words such as “actor/actress” or “prince/princess”. Another way of viewing male influence in language can be seen in how people always use the man’s name first in addressing a couple. We say husband and wife not wife and husband (Stewart et al. 2003: 53).

2.3.2 Gender related words that display power

Some words that indicate what sex a person has can also indicate that person’s social power and personality. The term “gentleman” is seen as positive whereas the term “lady” sounds colder and more distant (Stewart et al. 2003: 54).

Another interesting aspect is that when a man is addressed as ‘Mr’ there is nothing that tells us if this man is married or not, but when a woman is addressed as miss or ‘Mrs’ it is an assumption taken by the person addressing her that she is or is not, married (Macmillian, 2002: 910-929). A couple of hundred years ago ‘Miss’ was a way of addressing children. This title, when used on a grown woman, could be considered as lowering somebody’s social status. Since the 70s some women use ‘Ms’ instead of ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs’ so that nobody can see whether they are married or not (Stewart et al. 2003: 54).

2.4 Language change

There have been suggestions as to how language could be made more non-sexist, i.e., more gender neutral. Nowadays people are becoming aware of this issue and starting to reconsider their speech. For instance, some people try to use words with no indications of what sex a person has. These are words such as “camera operator”. It is also becoming more and more
usual to use ‘woman’ instead of ‘man’ to create titles for certain professions which are more
gender neutral, such as, ‘business woman’ (Stewart et al. 2003: 58).

Language will continue changing as new generations grow up. Teenagers of today have
developed their own way of communication and they will be responsible for introducing
changes in ways of communicating regardless of language. And as new technologies are
invented new words are necessary to explain these. As long as technology develops and
children are born language will continue to develop and gradually change as new generations
grow up. (The national science foundation: 2008).

Since older generations will preserve their old habits of speaking, as said above, there will be
a generational difference in society regarding communication in general and also in how
people address strangers.

3. Method
The method used to perform this study is observations. There are different forms of
observations but the one used in this study is both an ethological observation and a participant
observation. Ethological observation, where the observer studies the participants’ behaviour
in their natural environment, has high validity since the participants tend to act more
normally in their natural environment then they would in for instance a laboratory experiment.
But since this study is to observe people and see if they use terms of endearment in different
situations, without them knowing that they are in fact being observed the researcher needed to
use one more observational method, participant observation. In other words, the observer
participated in the social behaviour and interacted with the participants (Hayes p. 57-59).

3.1 Procedure
The data was collected by one man and one woman 24 and 27 years old. The procedure was
that they each went into nine clothes stores considered to be of higher social status and nine
stores considered to be of lower status. The stores were labelled upper class because of the
brands that were for sale in the store and the prices of their clothes. If the store had a sale
going on with unknown brands, it was labelled as lower class.
This procedure was also carried out at nine restaurants of higher social status and nine of lower status. The observers looked for two different criteria for labelling restaurants such as class, the presence of waiters and waitresses and how high the prices were. If the restaurant had low prices and there were no waiters and waitresses, the restaurant was labelled as lower class. The questions asked were, of course, relevant to the store or restaurant so that they would be as natural as possible. Another aspect was also taken in consideration; whether the participants used a non-formal body language (touched the observers) while interacting with them.

The same procedure was also carried out in nine different hotels, both lower class and upper class. The lower class hotels were so labeled because they had lower prices for their rooms and the visitors had to bring their own linen and pay for their breakfast. The upper class hotels were places were the prices were higher, visitors did not have to bring their own linen and the breakfast was included.

An effort was made not to lead the participant to answer in the way the observer wanted them to answer. This means that while in a clothes store the observer would ask where the children’s clothes were and in restaurants the questions were either about the menu or on their opening hours.

The same procedure of asking relevant questions was carried out with taxi drivers and randomly selected people in the street.

3.2 Choosing participants
In order to study the effects of age and gender on the participants’ response, the participants were chosen from different age groups and both sexes. As the observers were both young but of different genders this gave them the opportunity to see how female male communication differed from communication between people of the same gender.

4. Results

The results of the study will be presented in different categories. The categories are; restaurants, stores, taxi drivers, hotel staff and asking people for directions. These categories have been subdivided according to social class and gender.
4.1 Restaurants

Figure 1: Social status of restaurants observed, and use of ‘love’ according to the observer’s gender

In the observations of restaurants there was a difference according in social class. Both in the youth hostel restaurant and in one café where three women addressed the female observer as “love” (see figure 1) were labeled as ‘lower class’. In the upper class restaurants the staff were mostly women and men estimated to be under the age of 40 and all of them used very formal language while addressing both observers. There was also an interesting difference in how younger people addressed the female observer compared to how older responders did. All the responders that used the term “love” were women estimated to be in the age over 40 years old.

There was a difference in the way the female and the male observers were spoken to. In no case when people addressed the male observer, did they use the term “love” or any other terms of endearment. Everybody who addressed the male observer used very formal speech and formal body language. None of the younger women used the term “love” although they had very informal body language. Some came closer to the female observer then the male and some also touched her shoulder.
4.2 Stores

![Bar graph showing social status of clothing stores observed and use of 'love' according to observer's gender.]

**Figure 2: Social status of clothing stores observed, and use of ‘love’ according to the observer’s gender**

In the observations of the stores there were a number of interesting results. In none of the lower class stores that were observed did any of the staff address the observers with terms of endearment (See figure 2). These stores were labelled as “lower class” based on the prices and brands of clothes moreover, the stores that were chosen had “sale” signs in the windows. There were almost only young women working in these stores with the exception of one young man.

The age of the participants was an important factor in the result because, as in the restaurants, all the people that used the term “love” were women estimated to be over the age of 40. This might be the reason why there was no participant in the lower class stores who used the term “love”.

In the upper class stores there were two people who used a term of endearment. The upper class stores were labelled upper class based on their prices and the expensive brands of clothes they sold; some of these stores also had a person standing at the door, welcoming the customers. In these stores the staff members were mostly women estimated to be over the age of 40. An interesting observation about the upper class stores was that the male and female observers were treated very differently by the staff members. They approached the male
observer in a very formal way and used formal language while speaking to him. They were all very polite and kept their distance from him. When they approached the female observer, they changed their behaviour. Their speech became informal and three of the staff members used the term “love”. They used very informal body language; some of them touched the female observer on the shoulder and stood very close to her. The behaviour was similar to an adult approaching a child.

There was an interesting difference here compared to the restaurants: the term “love” was used in none of the lower class stores which means that we cannot say that terms of endearment are more frequently used in stores of lower social status which we could say in the case of restaurants of lower social status. One similarity between restaurants and stores is that the people who used the term “love” were all women estimated to be over the age of 40.

4.3 Taxi drivers

![Figure 3: Number of taxi drivers approached and use of ‘love’ according to the observer’s gender](image)

Here the results are hard to define according to social class. All the taxi drivers were male and estimated to be over the age of 40. There was an interesting difference in how the male and the female observer were spoken to (see Figure 3). When a taxi driver spoke to both the female and the male observer he used very formal speech and he was very polite. When a taxi driver spoke only to the male observer he also used very formal language and kept his distance in a polite manner.
The difference was when the taxi drivers spoke only to the female observer, they changed to an more friendly and informal way of speaking. Their voices became softer and three of the taxi drivers used the term “love”. This change in tone of voice can be compared to the way an adult speaks to a child.

4.4 Hotel staff

![Figure 4: Social status of hotels observed, and use of ‘love’ according to the observer’s gender.](chart)

In this section it is easy to label whether an observation was made in a lower class hotel or an upper class hotel because of the standard of hotel. The lower class hotels that were visited were youth hostels, which are considered lower class because of prices and the standard of the rooms. Upper class hotels have higher prices and a higher standard of rooms. An interesting finding was that all of the hotel staff used very formal speech and body language towards both the male and the female observer (see Figure 4). The lower class hotels addressed the female observer as ‘Mrs.’ All of the hotel staff members were people estimated to be under the age of 40.
4.5 Asking people for directions

![Bar chart showing number of people who used the term "love", number of people approached, number of people who addressed the female observer with the term "love", and number of people who addressed the male observer with the term "love".]

**Figure 5: Number of people approached, and use of ‘love’ according to the observer’s gender**

The responders observed here were hard to label as lower and upper class because it is hard to define what sort of social status a person has by merely speaking to them for less than one minute.

The interesting finding in this section of the results is the difference between how the male and the female observers were addressed (see Figure 5). All of the people that were approached were women estimated to be over the age of 40. When they were approached by the male observer, they were polite but kept a distance between themselves and the observer. When they were approached by the female observer they became more informal, some of them used the term “love” and used friendly body language. Some of them touched the observer and stood very close to her.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to see whether native speakers of English in Northern Ireland and Ireland still use terms of endearments, more specifically ‘love’, while addressing strangers and if they do what are the reasons? Another purpose was to see if they use familiar body language while addressing a stranger.
The observations were performed at 9 restaurants and 9 stores with upper class standards and lower class standards as well as interactions with taxi drivers and people in the streets just to see whether there was a difference in terms of endearment according to social class. Labov carried out a study that showed that the way a person speaks differs in upper class and lower class surroundings (in Clark, Esscholz & Rosa, 1997: 278). However the results from the observations in this study showed that terms of endearment were observed in both upper class surroundings and lower class surroundings. The difference was that they were only used while addressing the female observer and the people using them were all over the age of forty.

The results showed that nobody used terms of endearment with the male observer. This supports the claim that men and women are spoken to in different ways in some cultures. Women are more likely to be addressed by their first name or a nickname then a man is (Wardhaug 1986: 314). This is confirmed by the observations because the female observer was addressed with a term of endearment on more than one occasion while the male observer was not.

On some occasions during the observations the female observer was spoken to with language similar to one that people use while addressing a child. As Stewart et al. (2003) claims, terms such as Miss, were, before the 19th century, a way of addressing a woman as if she were a child. It was only after this time that Miss became a way of labelling a woman as married or unmarried (Stewart et al. 2003: 54). This can mean that, older generations today still have this way of addressing women because they copy their parents’ and grandparents’ behaviour. This can be the reason why only older people used terms of endearment while addressing the female observer (Stewart et al. 2003: 54).

The fact that 100% of the participants who used a term of endearment were over the age of forty while the younger participants used none supports the claim that language changes from generation to generation. There is an attitude change in how younger people speak and in how older people speak. The older generation tend to not change the attitudes that they had when they were young (Myers, 2005: 267). The younger people observed used more polite language; they did not use a first name while addressing the male or the female observer but used their marital status with their last name to be more polite. The people estimated to be over the age of 40 were more informal while addressing the female observer but very formal while addressing the male observer. This also supports the claim that that some older people
do not change their attitudes when they get older; they stick to the language they used while they were young. This can be the reason why there is a difference in speech from the younger to the older generation.

An interesting theory as to why there is a difference in how people estimated to be over the age of 40 used terms of endearment and young people did not can be seen in comparing this result to what Stewart et al. (2003) claim in their book that there is a change going on in languages today. We are moving towards a society with a more non-sexist language. This means that people today are trying to be less discriminating in their speech (Stewart et al. 2003: 58). This might be why elderly people still had their old ways of speaking towards the female observer when the younger people kept a polite distance and used very formal language.

The reason why there was only a certain group of people that used terms of endearment can also be because of their own family and how they were brought up. As Bratt, Paulston & Tucker claim, a child that is brought up in a family with a mother and father who always use polite language towards other people is likely to copy this behaviour and act the same way him or herself. It is also possible that a child grows up to be the opposite, All depending on how the parents have behaved towards them (Passer-Smith, 2007: 417-418). This can be the reason why certain people used terms of endearment in the observations while other people did not. This means that the way a person uses language depends on their own personal background, this is interesting because while some of the participants used terms of endearments without using body language, others used both. This might mean that using an informal way of speaking and using informal body language is due to the culture in a person’s family. Since children copy the behaviour of their parents it is likely that they behave accordingly. If this is the case there would be variation in behaviour from person to person, which is seen in the results of this study.

In conclusion we can see in these results that people still use terms of endearment in Northern Ireland and Ireland today, although it seems as if this is slowly changing since the result was not perfect result. It seems as if the people who use terms of endearment are men and women estimated to be over the age of forty. They only used terms of endearment while addressing the female observer. Some of them also used very informal body language while talking to her.
The results also showed that everybody in the observations used very formal language while addressing the male observer.

The reason why terms of endearment were used by a certain age group can depend on their own social background and how they were raised by their parents but also because their generation had their own culture of speech which makes it difficult for them to stop. It is difficult because the attitude a person has is something that seldom changes over a lifetime.

It is, of course, impossible to generalize from these findings to the whole world of English speakers, that is why further research could be performed in other English speaking cultures as well to see if it supports the present findings. The results showed that younger people did not use terms of endearment which might mean that there has been a change from the older to the younger generation. Therefore it would be interesting to see, if this study is performed again in some years, if terms of endearment are on the way to disappearing in the interaction between strangers.
List of references


