

# *Vouvoisement* and *tutoiement*: sociolinguistic reflections<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical review of research on the T/V (*tu/vous*) choice in French, and an analysis of this alternation in terms of markedness, variation and change. While there is unique public interest in T/V as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, it is a subject that has paradoxically been under-represented in linguistics and sociolinguistics publications produced in France. Much of the research conducted on the topic has been carried out by scholars based in other countries, and this is characterised by a rich variety of disciplinary approaches. T/V in contemporary French is a non-probabilistic phenomenon and is therefore not a sociolinguistic variable, in the Labovian sense. Considering the various senses of ‘markedness’, discussed by Haspelmath (2006), there is a good case for considering T as the unmarked option, rather than V, as has often been suggested. The long-term historical tendency for French to lose many of its inflections suggests that, at some time in the future, it is quite possible that *vouvoisement* will all but disappear. Yet there is no sign in France at present of a massive and decisive shift away from V.

## INTRODUCTION

The choice between *vouvoisement* and *tutoiement* (henceforth, ‘T/V’) is possibly the most salient of all sociolinguistic phenomena in French. It is, for example, the aspect of the language most often said to have been influenced by the events of May 1968: one of the slogans reportedly written on the walls of the Sorbonne at the time was ‘Tu es avec moi ou je ne vous connais pas’, an adaptation of the well-known saying ‘Tu es avec moi, ou tu es contre moi.’ (Sichler, 1986: 24). Native speakers of French have a high degree of awareness of T/V and will often discuss it at great length, when invited to do so (cf. Sherzer, 1988). Mentions of *vouvoisement* and *tutoiement* on the Internet are numerous, and on interactive sites they often lead to a large number of comments and questions.<sup>2</sup> Second-language learners of French whose

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<sup>2</sup> The author of one question on ‘fr.answers.yahoo.com’ requests advice on how to tackle the delicate matter of asking his parents-in-law to address him with T instead of V. In February and March 2008, there was much Internet comment on an incident involving

first language does not have a polite second-person pronoun find the appropriate use of T/V a significant challenge (cf. Béal, 1989; Lyster, 1996; Liddicoat, 2006). Grammars, etiquette guides for native speakers and textbooks for L2 learners of French offer advice for native and non-native speakers (e.g. Weil, 1983; Gervais and Sanders, 1986; Walker *et al.*, 1986; Hawkins and Towell, 2001; Rodrigues and Neather, 2001; Grevisse and Goosse, 2007; Williams *et al.*, 2007). Articles on T/V appear regularly in the French press, describing (and speculating about) the usage of politicians, journalists and other celebrities. Those who write about T/V typically focus on unusual patterns of usage, which highlight the norm by deviating from it, in rather the same way that asterisked examples are used by syntacticians to specify the nature of grammatical rules.<sup>3</sup>

This article will first consider the status of French T/V as an object of academic inquiry, among linguists and others, and offer a critical review of the methods employed in this research. There follows an examination of the status of T/V from the viewpoint of variationist sociolinguistics: is T/V appropriately referred to as a sociolinguistic variable? I will then assess the evidence for referring to either T or V as the 'unmarked variant' in contemporary French. Finally I will discuss whether the reported increase in *tutoiement* over the last fifty years means that *vouvoiement* is destined to disappear from the language, just as *thou*, *thee* etc. have disappeared from English. The focus throughout will be on the French of native speakers.

## I. RESEARCH ON *VOUVOIEMENT* AND *TUTOIEMENT*

### 1.1 *Public interest, professional indifference?*

It is paradoxical that, whereas many laypersons have a great deal to say about French T/V, most of the major overviews of spoken French have barely mentioned this topic (e.g. Blanche-Benveniste and Jeanjean, 1987; Blanche-Benveniste, 1997; Gadet, 1997; Ball, 2000). Even more surprising perhaps is the fact that French textbooks of sociolinguistics have devoted little, if any, attention to this important aspect of communicative competence (e.g. Marcellesi and Gardin, 1974; Bachman *et al.*, 1981; Baylon, 1991; Gadet, 2007). In contrast most English-language overviews of sociolinguistics devote several pages to honorifics ('polite forms'),

President Sarkozy and a member of the public at the *Salon de l'Agriculture* in Paris on 23.2.08, which was captured on video and placed on the website of *Le Parisien*: <http://www.leparisien.fr/home/info/politique/articles.htm?articleid=296081002>. Declining to shake the President's hand, the man insulted him, saying 'Touche moi pas, tu me salis', to which the President replied 'Casse-toi alors, pauvre c\*\*!'. Nicolas Sarkozy has long been reported as using T in public quite readily with other public figures, but this exchange (and another, similar incident in November 2007, involving a Breton fisherman who had also insulted him) signalled a striking departure from the very formal speech styles of previous French Presidents. Claudel (2008) discusses President Sarkozy's use of address pronouns with Vladimir Putin in October 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Unusual patterns include, for example, the use of reciprocal V by well-known couples, such as the actress Arielle Dombasle and the writer Bernard Henri-Lévy.

including the T/V pronouns and other terms of address, in French and other languages (e.g. Fasold, 1990; Trudgill, 2000; Romaine, 1994; Holmes, 2001; Mesthrie *et al.*, 2000; Wardhaugh, 2005). It is noteworthy, however, that this material is usually located in different chapters from those dealing with 'Labovian' sociolinguistic variables.

In academic journals based in France which are oriented towards contemporary French or to sociolinguistics, the coverage of T/V has similarly been remarkably thin. In *Le Français moderne*, published since 1933, the only article on this topic appears to have been a brief study of usage in the French spoken in Mali, contributed by a British scholar (Constable, 1984). The journals *Langages* and *Langue française* (founded in 1966 and 1969, respectively) do not appear to have published any article specifically on this topic. Part of Anscombe (1985) in *Langages* is devoted to a discussion of the meaning of the deictic verbs *tutoyer* and *vouvoyer*, but not strictly to T/V as such. Alvarez-Pereyre (1977) in *Langue française* and Grimaud (1989) in *Le Français moderne* are on terms of address such as *Madame*, *Monsieur*, not T/V. However *La Linguistique* did publish an article on this topic in 1978, by a researcher based in Switzerland (Schoch, 1978), and more recently has published a contribution from Canada, devoted to problems of translating certain pronouns, including those of the second person (Schogt, 2004). The *French Review*, intended mainly for teachers of French in the United States, published a cluster of articles on T/V in the early 1970s, stimulated perhaps in part by the post-1968 increase in *tutoiement* (Bryan, 1972; Maley, 1972; Bustin-Lekeu, 1973; Ford, 1974), and two more subsequently (Vassallo-Villaneau, 1991; Williams and van Compernelle, 2007). *Le Français dans le Monde*, which, like the *French Review*, has a readership of language teachers rather than linguistics researchers, has devoted at least two short articles to T/V (Calvet, 1976; Ibrahim, 1984). *Langage et Société*, founded in 1977, and probably the best-known sociolinguistics periodical in France, published nothing specifically on French T/V prior to a special issue in 2004 which was devoted to second-person pronouns (Pires, 2004), and included some French-specific contributions.

These observations are not of course intended to belittle the significance of any of the publications referred to, or indeed the research on T/V by those French or other native francophone scholars who have published elsewhere. But the very modest amount of attention given to this topic in French linguistics journals is surprising, and one can readily sympathise with the view expressed recently by Gardner-Chloros: 'Il est temps que le tutoiement/vouvoisement [...] reprenne sa place parmi les variables sociolinguistiques les plus centrales et révélatrices.' (2003–2004: 98).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> One very welcome development is the recent publication of a final report by the Melbourne project on address in French, German and Swedish (Clyne, Norrby and Warren, 2009) and of an edited collection of French-specific research (Peeters and Ramière, 2009).

Why has there not been more research on T/V within linguistics or sociolinguistics in France? One possible explanation is that it is felt to be a topic that is not properly linguistic, one that lends itself rather to study within neighbouring disciplines, such as social psychology or anthropology. Another reason may be that the discipline of linguistics within France has traditionally been less receptive to sociolinguistics than has been the case in other western countries, perhaps due to the greater prestige attached in French academic circles (and in the French educational system) to theorising and abstract thought, rather than to research based on data.<sup>5</sup> In addition it seems to be generally recognised that the complexities of T/V usage arise from socio-psychological factors, rather than matters of linguistic distribution or constraints. This is of course precisely why T/V is a topic of such great interest to the general public. Even a relatively salient grammatical topic such as past participle agreement receives far less public attention than T/V, to judge by the number of mentions on the Internet: 26,200 ‘hits’ for *l'accord du participe passé*, compared with about 80,000 for *tutoiement* (on 8.2.08).

### 1.2 The disciplinary diversity of T/V research

Despite the paucity of articles on T/V in French academic journals, a large number of studies have in fact been conducted, especially by scholars based in other countries. Much of this research since the 1960s has taken as a major point of reference the celebrated article by Brown and Gilman (1960), ‘The pronouns of power and solidarity’, but research on T/V had been carried out long before that, notably from the perspectives of philology and literary criticism: e.g. Schliebitz (1886), Fay (1920) (both cited by Brown and Gilman), Foulet (1918–19) and Bakos (1955). A good deal of this early work concentrated on the complex patterns of switching between *tu* and *vous* in Old French texts. Post-1960 studies have adopted a broader range of disciplinary approaches, methods and analytical concepts, including the following:

- philological and literary study of texts (e.g. Kennedy, 1972; Field, 1986, 1987; Lebsanft, 1987; Morrison, 1988; Hunt, 2003);
- cultural history (Wolff, 1994; Coffen, 2002);
- socio-psychological questionnaires and experiments (Lambert, 1967, 1969; Lambert and Tucker, 1976);
- ethnographic interviews and long-term participant observation (Guigo, 1991; Morford, 1997; Eckert, 1981); Sherzer (1988) analyses various types of recorded narratives about T/V;
- socio-pragmatic analysis of conversation (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1992; Martiny, 1996);

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Gadet (2004), who also makes this observation. Sociolinguistics has not been universally welcomed by linguists in other western countries: Meyerhoff (2003) discusses the resistance to the sub-discipline within a traditional linguistics department in a British university.

- sociolinguistic questionnaires, interviews and, most recently, discussion- or focus-groups (Bustin-Lekeu, 1973; Schoch, 1978; Gardner-Chloros, 1991, 2007; Hughson, 2003, 2009; Warren, 2006, 2009).

Peeters (2004) has provided a wide-ranging critical review of much of this work. Some researchers have recently begun studying T/V use in films (Abecassis, 2002, 2005; Hirvonen and Sutinen, 2005; Havu and Sutinen, 2007) and in electronic written discourse, such as Internet ‘chat’, discussion fora and on-line dating advertisements (Williams and van Compernelle, 2007, 2009; van Compernelle, 2008). Researchers in Second Language Acquisition have also turned their attention to T/V usage in learners’ language, borrowing from the range of data types and approaches referred to above (e.g. Lyster, 1996; Dewaele, 2002, 2004; Liddicoat, 2006; Planchenault, 2009).

The vast majority of empirical studies of T/V in spoken French have focused on reported usage (sometimes referred to as ‘perceptions’) rather than actual observation of behaviour. The main reason for this is that it has generally been thought to be impossible to gather much useful data on T/V by classic techniques such as the Labovian sociolinguistic interview, and that observing even one individual speaking with a wide range of addressees would be excessively time-consuming. Researchers using questionnaires, written or oral, have made the generally reasonable assumption that informants are able to report accurately on their own T/V usage with actual interlocutors. What is more open to doubt is whether informants can always report accurately on other people’s usage, or on hypothetical situations. In contrast, studies that have drawn their data from written sources, such as novels, plays, film-scripts and Internet ‘chat’, have been able to focus much more on specific examples of T/V. The analysis of such data has produced many valuable insights, but it is unlikely that these sources reflect everyday usage in spontaneous speech – the principal object of study in sociolinguistics.

One exception to the general research pattern regarding the spoken language is Eckert (1981), who was able to conduct long-term observation of usage of the second-person pronouns in a bilingual Gascon-French village (Saint Pierre de Soulan in the Ariège), during fieldwork for her main project on phonological variation and change. Similarly Guigo (1991) observed the use of address terms (including pronouns) towards the end of his period of ethnographic fieldwork in the offices of a company based in Paris. Rapid Anonymous Observation and Language Diaries have both proved their worth as data-collection techniques in researching the related areas of language choice and code-switching (cf. Milroy, 1987; Gardner-Chloros, 1985), but it would appear these have been employed only to a very limited extent for research into French T/V usage. Lambert and Tucker (1976: 52–3) report on a small-scale study in which they sent two teenage boys into department stores in Montreal: one boy used *tu* when addressing a saleswoman (inappropriately, given that this was still in the 1960s), while the second boy surreptitiously recorded the interaction, and, after the first boy had moved away, asked the saleswoman whether she was shocked by the inappropriate *tutoiement*. (In most cases, she was.)

More recently, as part of Williams and van Compernelle's (2007) study of T/V in Internet chat, the 'fieldworker' became a participant observer and conducted a simple experiment: having established that reciprocal *tutoiement* is the norm in this type of electronic discourse, he set out to discover how other members of the 'chat room' would react to sustained *vouvoiement* from him. (Result: they expressed surprise.) As for Language Diaries, I am not aware of any study that has used these in researching French T/V, though Gadet (2007: 170) proposes a practical exercise along these lines for students using her sociolinguistics textbook. Although one might consider journalists' articles on T/V as anecdotal or superficial, they do sometimes provide useful observations of actual behaviour and can thus, to a modest extent, help fill the gap left by academic research on the subject. For example, Négroni (2007) describes some cases of upper-class French people who are maintaining *vouvoiement* within the family, though she also comments that the majority of young parents in this class now use reciprocal *tu* with their children.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to Brown and Gilman's (1960) 'semantics' of power and solidarity, several other concepts have been invoked to interpret and account for patterns of T/V usage, notably politeness (both as a pre-theoretical concept and as a technical notion within the Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson (1978/1987). Brown and Levinson characterise reciprocal V usage as expressing negative politeness (approximately equivalent to 'social distance', or the absence of solidarity), while reciprocal T conveys positive politeness (roughly, 'solidarity'). The fact that both patterns are widespread within France, in different domains of linguistic behaviour, suggests that the country is located somewhere between the two poles of a 'positive-politeness culture' and a 'negative-politeness culture'.<sup>7</sup> T/V has also been interpreted (e.g. by Gardner-Chloros, 2007) in terms of the 'acts of identity' concept, originally developed by Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) to help account for sociolinguistic variation more generally, especially in multilingual and Creole-speaking communities. Since different social groups vary in their tendency to favour T or V, the individual's behaviour in this respect may reflect her/his desire to take on a particular type of identity.

The data produced by studies of T/V have been both quantitative and qualitative, and have been analysed with the help of a wide range of techniques and tools, from the schematic diagrams of Brown and Gilman (1960), to Guigo's (1991) chart representing the progression from formal to informal patterns and Béal's complex systemic network (1989, 2009). Béal's network diagram is rather more intricate than the computer-style flow charts first produced to represent choices of address by Ervin-Tripp (1972).<sup>8</sup> Naturally the various disciplinary approaches and data-collection methods have different strengths and weaknesses and these

<sup>6</sup> A recent estimate, mentioned on the *France 5* website (accessed 25.08.09), is that there are still 20,000 French families in which the children use V to their parents: <http://les-maternelles.france5.fr/index-fr.php?dossier=1395&page=dossiers>

<sup>7</sup> Similarly Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2005) concludes that, in terms of conversational style, France shares some characteristics with northern Europe and some with the south.

<sup>8</sup> Following Ervin-Tripp's (1972) example, Bachmann (1976-77) elaborated a flow chart for non-pronominal address terms in French, such as Title + Last Name or First Name.

will not be reiterated here. But one general observation is that psychologically oriented work, including research conducted within the framework of Second Language Acquisition, tends to emphasise the statistical treatment of quantitative data, whereas ethnographic and pragmatic work has stressed instead qualitative data and its interpretation.

## 2. THE STATUS OF *TU/VOUS* IN VARIATIONIST SOCIOLINGUISTICS

T/V has been described, by several researchers, as a ‘variable’, a ‘variable rule’ and/or a ‘sociolinguistic marker’, even though it has not been subject to the same kind of quantitative analysis associated with variation theory. At first glance, it might appear that the analysis of T/V does not fall at all within the scope of variationist sociolinguistics. In the first chapter of *Sociolinguistic Theory*, Chambers has said that address terms (including T/V) are linguistically irrelevant (2003: 10), and he excludes all discussion of them from his book. Commenting on this decision, Mesthrie *et al.* (2000: 319) suggest that it is due to the fact that variationists focus on the vernacular, which by definition emerges from ‘equal encounters’, typically between peers, and these almost invariably involve reciprocal patterns of address, especially *tutoiement*. As a general rule, this is indeed the case, but variationists do investigate more formal styles too (e.g. radio or television broadcasts), and these sometimes involve unequal encounters.

In contrast, Coupland (2007: 56) seems fairly receptive to the idea of according a place for address forms within the study of sociolinguistic variation. He writes:

We can think of French *tu* versus *vous*, and first-name address versus title-plus-last-name address, as socially meaningful variants of sociolinguistic variables. Variation among variants is “stylistic” in the general sense of being associated with different contexts of use. But in this case the variants are associated with different relational categories or configurations. We might say that the “choice” of stylistic variants in these paradigms is relationally sensitive. It either reflects or constructs qualities of social relations between speakers and listeners.

Others have occasionally referred to the T/V choice as a variable rule, a concept that was widely employed in North American sociolinguistic research in the 1970s, as a means of relating variable data (usually phonological) to generative rules. On the other hand, it has been claimed that T/V cannot be considered a variable rule, because the variation between the two pronouns is not (apparently) influenced by linguistic constraints, as is the case with ‘true’ sociolinguistic variables. While it is indeed true that there are at the present time no linguistic constraints affecting the T/V choice, this is not the essential reason why this alternation cannot be termed a variable rule.<sup>9</sup> Such rules have never seemed an appropriate method of representing variation between two pronouns, since there are no obvious grounds

<sup>9</sup> One example of a *bona fide* sociolinguistic variable that is not subject to linguistic constraints is the variation between *on* and *tu/vous* as indefinite pronouns. This is affected by various pragmatic and discoursal constraints, but not by purely linguistic ones, according to Laberge (1977) and Ashby (1992).

for positing a rule transforming one pronoun into another (e.g. *tu* into *vous*, or vice versa). But even for phonological variation where such rules do often correspond to a natural process (e.g. assimilation, lenition), variable rules were progressively abandoned from the early 1980s, once the generative rules on which they were based fell out of favour in theoretical phonology, and when it became clear that variable rules were essentially data-displaying devices (cf. Fasold, 1991).

If T/V is not a variable rule, is it then a sociolinguistic variable, simply? As is the case with well-known sociolinguistic variables (e.g. the presence vs. absence of *ne*, the alternation between *nous* and *on*), the two variants indeed have equivalent referential meaning in certain contexts – not in all contexts, of course, since *vous* sometimes has plural reference. Furthermore it is generally accepted that the variants of a sociolinguistic variable may differ in terms of one or more aspects of non-descriptive meaning, such as the distinct social meanings of *tu* and *vous*, underlined by Coupland (2007).

One of the defining criteria of sociolinguistic variables is that the use of their variants is socially differentiated within a given speech community. This is the case for French T/V, but in a way that is crucially different from variables such as *ne*-omission or optional liaison. These latter variables are characterised by the fact that, in a given speech style, speakers quite often alternate between one variant and the other in an unpredictable fashion, and different speakers typically use differing proportions of the two variants. (For some variables, however, there are individuals who use one variant categorically, to the total exclusion of the other.) In the case of T/V in modern French, on the other hand, it is extremely rare to encounter such patterns of fluctuation between the two forms. On any given occasion, it is unusual to find even a single switch from one to the other variant, unless there is a significant change in the speech situation (such as a shift from a private conversation to a media interview, as reported by Carton, 2003). This means that, in a particular speech event between two interlocutors, no matter how frequently – or infrequently – the informant uses T/V, they will normally make the same choice of address pronoun throughout. In variationist terms, a speaker's use of T/V with any given addressee in a given situation is typically categorical, the determining factor being in most cases the relationship between speaker and hearer – as perceived by the speaker. (An exceptional case of switching will be discussed in section 3.1 below.) Even in those very occasional instances where a speaker exceptionally varies between T and V, the variation is not of the same systematic kind that is required for variationist quantification in terms of relative frequencies. In contemporary French-speaking countries, within any given community (be it a village, an extended family, a school or a work-place), each speaker needs to know whether to use T or V with each interlocutor they are likely to encounter – just as in bilingual communities the speaker has to know which language variety to use with each other member of that community. Alternatively, if they do not know beforehand, speakers need to be able to negotiate the choice.<sup>10</sup> The parallel with bilingualism was highlighted by

<sup>10</sup> Heller (1979, 1982) reported that, in Montreal, some telephone conversations in service encounters open with the words *Bonjour*, *hello?*, as a means of negotiating language choice:



Ferguson, who compared the T/V alternation to the choice of language variety in an idealised diglossic community where everyone has a command of both varieties (1991: 228).

Labov (2008) has recently described T/V as a ‘non-stochastic’ variable, in contrast with stochastic (i.e. probabilistic) variables of the classic kind, the use of which typically fluctuates during the same speech event or stretch of discourse. Since T/V is not, in modern French, a probabilistic variable, it follows that it should not, strictly speaking, be referred to either as a ‘sociolinguistic marker’ or a ‘sociolinguistic indicator’, since these two terms refer to sub-categories of probabilistic variables – the first being those that are subject to both social differentiation and style-shifting, the second those displaying only social differentiation, without any appreciable degree of style-shifting (Chambers and Trudgill, 1998: 70–72). As mentioned above, in contemporary French there are no linguistic or discursal (i.e. contextual) constraints influencing the choice of T or V, and so there would be no point in coding individual occurrences of T/V from a given corpus for statistical analysis.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. MARKEDNESS AND FRENCH T/V

#### 3.1 *V as the unmarked variant*

Although T/V is not then a stochastic sociolinguistic variable, it is nevertheless convenient to refer to T and V as ‘variants’, and in this section I will discuss the concept of markedness in relation to them. Many writers have described *vous* as the unmarked variant (e.g. Brown and Levinson, 1987: 292; Maingueneau, 1994; Hughson, 2003; Halmøy, 2009). The fact that most journalistic pieces on this subject include *tu* or *tutoiement* in their title (rather than *vous* or *vouvoisement*) implies perhaps a view that *tu* is the marked variant, or, in media terms, that it is more newsworthy than *vous*.<sup>12</sup> Peeters is one of the few writers who have, on the contrary, described T as unmarked:

‘[. . .] des deux systèmes coexistant avant l’avènement des idéologies égalitaires, l’un s’est imposé aux dépens de l’autre. *Tu* est dès lors devenu le seul pronom d’adresse non marqué et sémantiquement simple (ce qui n’exclut guère certains usages pragmatiquement marqués [. . .]), alors que *vous*, marqueur de la non-solidarité et de la distance, est toujours marqué et sémantiquement complexe.’ (2004: 6)

the negotiation of T or V tends to take place more indirectly than this, and not necessarily at the outset of the exchange.

<sup>11</sup> However, some scholars, working on Spanish or Portuguese, have used Varbrul to analyse the results of an elicitation test or questionnaire relating to T/V usage and the *non-linguistic* factors that affect the variation: e.g. Silva (1981) on Brazilian Portuguese, and Rodríguez Mendoza (2003, 2004) on the Spanish of La Gomera in the Canary Islands.

<sup>12</sup> Another factor is of course that the switch from V to T often implies increased intimacy between the interlocutors, and so has a greater power to attract the attention of readers or cinema audiences.

In this section I will examine the evidence for considering either T or V as the unmarked variant.<sup>13</sup> In an important recent article, Haspelmath (2006) has subjected the term ‘markedness’ to rigorous scrutiny, identifying twelve senses of the word that are commonly used in the linguistics literature. The discussion here will review those senses of markedness referred to by Haspelmath that are relevant to T/V.

As far as I am aware, there has been no in-depth justification of why *vous* should be considered the unmarked variant.<sup>14</sup> However one writer who has offered at least a brief rationale for this position is Maingueneau (1994: 27), who describes *vous* as the background from which *tu* detaches itself. He points out that, while one may quite readily suggest a switch to T (e.g. by saying, *Tutoyons-nous!*), it is almost inconceivable to say *Vouvoyons-nous!*. Other, perhaps more frequent, expressions that are used to suggest switching to T include *Si on se tutoyait?* and especially *On se dit ‘tu’?*, while the corresponding phrases suggesting a move to V do indeed seem quite improbable: *Si on se vouvoyait?* and *On se dit ‘vous’?*. Although the latter are not quite unacceptable pragmatically, it is difficult to imagine them being used except as a joke, or in some rather strange situation.<sup>15</sup> With or without overt linguistic marking of the change, permanent switches from T to V seem to be very rare in the conversational history between any two adults. A rare real-life case of a seemingly permanent switch from T to V is reported to have occurred between an elderly man and his adult daughter in 2004, after she succeeded him as Mayor on the *conseil municipal* of Puteaux (Hauts de Seine, France), and he stayed on as Deputy Mayor. In addition to using reciprocal *vouvoisement*, it is reported that they have vigorously opposed each other in council debates since the change of roles.<sup>16</sup> Even temporary switches from T to V are very uncommon, although they do sometimes occur when there is a major change in the nature of the audience (i.e. the totality of participants present) and/or the situation (e.g. going ‘on-air’ on radio or television). Carton (2003) discusses the case of certain television interviewers and politicians who switch from reciprocal *tutoiement* when speaking off-air to reciprocal V once they go on-air. He claims that the switch to V amounts to an attempt to deceive the public, in that it presents the relationship between journalist and interviewer as a purely professional one, which will enable the journalist to ask challenging and difficult questions. Another rare example of temporary T-to-V switching is discussed by Bilger and Cappeau (2004: 23) in their analysis of style-shifting in a non-media interview. The interviewee uses T to the old friend who is interviewing

<sup>13</sup> It is worth reminding ourselves that T/V involves not just the subject pronouns of address, *tu* and *vous*, but also second-person verbs, determiners (*ton* etc.) and other pronouns (*toi, le tien* etc.).

<sup>14</sup> A *JFLS* referee has pointed out the relevance of ‘situation’ with regard to markedness. I agree that what is marked usage in one situation may be unmarked in another. However most writers who have described T (or V) as the marked variant have not specified that they were referring to situational markedness.

<sup>15</sup> These utterances may be made considerably more plausible by the addition of one or more appropriate adverbials: e.g. *On se dit ‘vous’ devant le public ce soir?*

<sup>16</sup> See: <http://www.monputeaux.com/2005/10/>.

him, but then shifts to V when he starts talking about an association of which he is a member:

- (1) je vais donc *te* présenter l'Association des Petits Frères des Pauvres [...] les problèmes dont je *vous* parlais c'est euh l'analphabétisme l'illettrisme

This case involves rather more than a mere change of topic: as Bilger and Cappeau point out, the interviewee seems at this point to assume the role of spokesperson of the association. In terms of Bell's theory of Style Shifting (1984, 2001), one could describe this T-to-V switch as an instance of 'referee design' (rather than the more common 'audience design'), whereby a speaker modifies their speech so as to take on temporarily another identity or persona. As Bell (2001) points out, referee design is similar to 'acts of identity' in the approach of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985).

A further point made by Maingueneau (1994) is that *vous* is the spontaneously used form – except among children of course. He does not elaborate on what he means by 'spontaneously used', but it seems reasonable to suppose that he is thinking of cases where one adult is addressing another adult for the first time. This corresponds to the advice commonly given in textbooks for L2 learners of French: 'En règle générale, il est conseillé d'attendre que votre interlocuteur/trice vous tutoie.' (Gervais and Sanders, 1986: 22). One piece of evidence that perhaps suggests that laypersons consider *tu* to be marked is the fact that *tutoiement* has a far higher number of mentions on the Internet than does *vouvoisement*: c. 80,000 and c. 47,400, respectively (on 8.2.08). Similarly *avoir le tutoiement facile* is a fairly common expression (1,370 mentions on the Internet), while *avoir le vouvoisement facile* is not (just 6 'hits'). This implies that not everyone likes to use T with a wide range of addressees, including those outside one's own network of friends. In a comparative perspective, Kerbrat-Orecchioni observes that 'the number of situations in which one chooses to use *vous* rather than *tu* is greater in France than in most neighbouring countries' (2005: 41). One can readily accept that V is 'unmarked' in the sense that most French people opt for T only if they are addressing an adult belonging to their network of family, friends and colleagues – and even then, not all of these. But rather than the much-overused terms 'marked' vs 'unmarked', it is preferable to follow Haspelmath's advice to adopt a more specific term, such as 'rare/frequent in the world', or perhaps 'situationally rare/frequent'.

Another sense of 'markedness' (Haspelmath, 2006) according to which one could designate *vous* as unmarked is 'semantic markedness'. The example of this given by Haspelmath is the lexical pair *dog/bitch*, the former being the unmarked item since it can refer to the animal in general, regardless of sex. Similarly one could argue that *vous* is unmarked, since it can be used as the address pronoun, regardless of number.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Both *tu* and *vous* can of course be used as a general indefinite pronoun (cf. Coveney, 2003, 2009), but the notion of number is not involved in this case.

3.2 *T as the unmarked variant*

Contrary to the majority opinion, I would like to argue that *vouvoisement* is the marked member of the T/V pair in French, and I will endeavour to provide supporting evidence for this viewpoint by examining a number of other senses of ‘markedness’. Not all the senses identified by Haspelmath are relevant to T/V, notably those relating specifically to phonetic or phonological phenomena. ‘Textual markedness’ (or ‘markedness as rarity in texts’) is also omitted here, because the relative frequencies of T and V are heavily dependent on the nature of the texts in question, and it seems impossible to make any meaningful generalisation about this that would be valid for all genres or text-types.

For the sake of conciseness of presentation, the relevant senses of ‘markedness’ are listed below, together with a brief indication of why French T can be said to be unmarked in that particular sense. (Words enclosed in quotation marks are of Haspelmath’s formulation.)

- ‘**Formal markedness:** markedness as overt coding.’ In the spoken form of the present indicative of regular first-conjugation verbs (the ‘-er’ category that includes the vast majority of verbs), the T verb form has no inflection, whereas the V form has /e/.
  - ‘**Markedness as morphological difficulty or unnaturalness.**’ In both spoken and written French, V forms (pronouns, determiners, verbs) are nearly always at least as long as the corresponding T forms, and are often longer. The only exceptions to this are the written pairs *la tienne/la vôtre*, *les tiennes/les vôtres*.<sup>18</sup> Moreover the V verb form in the present indicative is highly irregular in three of the most frequent verbs (*êtes, faites, dites*) and this is reflected in the fact that *vous faites* and *vous dites* are not uncommon errors, even occurring sometimes in the speech of adult native speakers of French. The following example is from the Orléans corpus:<sup>19</sup>
- (2) alors quand le: – le maçon m’a dit hier mais vous saviez pas que si votre po  
votre tube avait éclaté vous *faisez* – tout tout écl à ce qu’il paraît –

(In this extract, the colon symbol represents a lengthened vowel, while the dash signifies a silent pause.)

- ‘**Cognitive markedness:** markedness as conceptual difficulty’. Being the plural category, as well as the polite singular, V ‘is marked because it requires more mental effort and processing time than the singular’. There are occasions when a hearer needs to pause to decide whether V is intended as plural or singular.
- ‘**Situational markedness:** markedness as rarity in the world’. Taking account of all interactions, and not just those involving adults outside one’s social

<sup>18</sup> There is however greater syncretism in the pronominal forms of V than in those of T: compare *tu, te, toi* with *vous, vous, vous*.

<sup>19</sup> Although the Orléans corpus was collected in 1969–70, it is still the largest corpus of spoken French that is publicly searchable: <http://bach.arts.kuleuven.be/elicop/>

networks, it is almost certain that V is rarer than T in contemporary French. (This point will be further discussed below.)

- ‘**Typological markedness:** markedness as typological implication or crosslinguistic rarity’. In the *World Atlas of Language Structures*, the majority of languages sampled (136/207) have no polite second-person pronoun such as *vous* (Helmbrecht, 2005).<sup>20</sup>

Of the various senses discussed by Haspelmath, it is ‘situational markedness’ that is the most sensitive to sociolinguistic factors. From a socio-historical viewpoint, it seems clear that, among the lower social strata – the overwhelming majority of the population down the centuries – reciprocal T has always been the norm in conversations between peers, and that such exchanges have almost certainly always represented the vast bulk of spoken language: children and young people talk mainly with their peers, and this surely has usually been true for most adults too. (For a sociological study of the number and type of people’s interlocutors in contemporary France, see Héran, 1990.) It has long been recognised that reciprocal T is normal among children, adolescents and often – though not universally – students, but Gadet has recently observed also that ‘the use of *tu* is now pretty much standard in the workplace in many professions’ (2006: 1789). However articles in business magazines suggest that behaviour is by no means uniform in the workplace: some managers encourage reciprocal T – or even try to impose it as a ‘management tool’ –, while others maintain the virtues of reciprocal V (cf. Beyer and Jouan, 2006; Lévy, 2006; Telfizian, 2006).

From the acquisitional viewpoint too, it seems clear that polite singular V is the marked variant: it is certainly acquired well after T, and although young children no doubt vary considerably regarding the age at which they master V, it seems uncontroversial to suggest that most start using *vouvoisement* systematically only after they go to school. Over a decade ago, Auger (1997: 17) commented that there were no empirical studies of children’s use of T/V in French, and this still appears to be the case. Studies of the acquisition of personal pronouns typically concern children aged less than 5, and tend to make no mention of polite V or indeed the plural persons (e.g. Girouard *et al.*, 1997).<sup>21</sup> Evidence from other languages seems somewhat contradictory regarding the age at which children master V: on

<sup>20</sup> Helmbrecht reports further that 49 of the languages in the sample of 207 have a binary distinction, 15 have a multiple distinction and 7 avoid the second-person pronoun as a way of expressing politeness. His map shows that distinctions are most common in areas of the world where societies have a ‘long sedentarization history’, including Europe and many parts of Asia. In contrast, among the indigenous languages of Africa, the Americas and Australasia, polite address pronouns are relatively rare. It is well known that contact has played a role in the diffusion of this phenomenon in Europe, but its presence in various indigenous languages elsewhere cannot be explained by European contact.

<sup>21</sup> In February 2008, the French government published its proposals for a new curriculum in schools: <http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid21007/presentation-des-nouveaux-programmes-du-primaire.html> These were to require children of 6–8 years old to learn to use V to their teacher, instead of T, which is currently widespread. Many teachers reacted against the proposal, and in June 2008 a revised document

the one hand, Auger mentions a study of a five-year-old Spanish-speaking child who showed an ability to use the singular V pronoun (*usted*) while playing the role of a teacher; but on the other hand, Hollos (1977) found that, in a group of Hungarian children, even nine-year-olds were unable to sustain reciprocal use of V. Notwithstanding the lack of empirical research into children's acquisition of French V, there is no doubt that most very young children hear V forms regularly, notably from stories in books or on television and DVDs.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. IS *VOUVOIEMENT* DESTINED TO DISAPPEAR?

Given the case for considering V to be the marked variant in French, one question of interest is whether *vouvoiment* is destined ultimately to disappear, as predicted by Bollack (1903: 15) and Bauche (1946: 102), and as suggested more recently in an article in *Le Figaro* entitled 'Le vouvoiment, un usage menacé d'extinction' (Négroni, 2007). Observers have commented on conflicting signs of change: for example, Peeters notes that in certain domains *vouvoiment* has gained ground in recent years (e.g. in the *Club Med* holiday camps), but he also suggests that most of the differences between young and old regarding T/V use are the result of age grading, not change in progress. He summarises some of the contradictory signs by saying:

Ce serait une folie que de chercher à nier que, dans l'ensemble, le tutoiement se soit répandu; mais ce serait une plus grande folie encore que d'ignorer qu'avec l'âge vient également la prise de conscience que le tutoiement n'est pas toujours approprié et que le vouvoiment est plus indiqué. (2004: 11).

On balance it seems that any recent gains made by V have been in quite restricted areas, and that T is slowly but surely continuing to push into what has hitherto been V's territory, for example in businesses and within more conservative families. There is of course no evidence that V is about to disappear completely, whether in France or in Quebec (Vincent, 1997, 2001), but in the longer term, if one of the two patterns is to die out, it will surely be *vouvoiment* rather than *tutoiement*. Not only is there the precedent of rapid and decisive shifts away from V in some other European societies, such as Sweden (cf. Clyne *et al.*, 2006), but also there are signs that other polite terms of address such as titles are on the verge of disappearing in France: Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2005) observes that customers now tend to greet the

specified simply that children of this age group 'approfondissent l'usage des règles de vie collective découvertes à l'école maternelle: telles l'emploi des formules de politesse ou du vouvoiment.' [http://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/2008/hs3/programme\\_CP\\_CE1.htm](http://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/2008/hs3/programme_CP_CE1.htm)

<sup>22</sup> In some contemporary books for children, the use of singular V is rare, but even the child characters use plural V at times (e.g. in the popular *Tchoupi* books by Thierry Courtin). These young characters tend not to speak to adults outside the immediate family circle, but one sometimes finds non-reciprocal *vouvoiment*, especially in books written in the 1960s or earlier: for example, in *La Croisière de l'île aux fleurs* (1963), the teddy bear says to the sandman 'Ne vous inquiétez pas pour moi, Patron.'

*boulangère* (for example) with a plain ‘Bonjour’, rather than the ‘Bonjour, Madame’, which used to be customary.

A significant factor in the evolution of T/V, but one which has not hitherto received sufficient attention, is the long-term loss of inflections in French. This is widely felt by observers to be the underlying reason why the *nous* + first-person plural verb form, with its *-ons* ending, has almost vanished from informal speech, replaced by *on* and the third-person singular verb. (Several studies have reported that *nous* occurs less than 5% of the time, and that even these occurrences can sometimes be attributed to a temporary shift to a more formal style, due to a change of topic in the conversation.<sup>23</sup>) It has often been pointed out that, following the demise of the 1st-person plural inflection, the 2nd-person plural is now the only form of the present indicative of regular first-conjugation verbs that still has an inflection in spoken French. Aalberse (2006) has argued persuasively that the loss of the T pronoun in English and Dutch was probably motivated in part by the economy in the verbal paradigm that would result. The avoidance of T by speakers and writers ultimately meant the disappearance of the corresponding second-person verb inflection (e.g. *thou walkest*), whereas the verb form required by V was identical with one required elsewhere in the paradigm.<sup>24</sup> Although forms such as *vous chante* have been attested in some overseas varieties of French (e.g. Old Mines French and some Cajun varieties), it is hard at present to imagine these appearing in ‘mainstream’ spoken French (Thogmartin, 1979: 115; Posner, 1996: 48).

Aside from the use of *tu* and *vous* as pronouns of address, there are other signs of an increase in the use of T forms, partly (though not entirely) at the expense of the corresponding V forms. This affects several uses of second-person forms that have undergone some degree of semantic bleaching. Firstly, the second-person singular imperative *tiens!* is commonly used as an interjection, even when the speaker is using *vous* as the pronoun of address. This well-established pattern is recorded by dictionaries in examples such as *Tiens, vous voilà* and *Tiens, vous croyez?* (Corréard and Grundy, 2001: 839). Other T verb forms that are sometimes used in this way include *dis (donc)!* and *attends!*<sup>25</sup> Two other areas in which T forms have been clearly gaining ground over their V equivalents are discourse markers (e.g. *tu sais?*, *tu vois?*) and the general indefinite subject pronoun (*tu*, or sometimes *vous*, used instead of standard *on*: cf. Coveney, 2003, 2009). The clearest evidence of change comes

<sup>23</sup> Fonseca-Greber and Waugh (2003: 108) report just 1% use of *nous* (versus first-person plural *on*) in their corpus of metropolitan and Swiss French. Coveney’s corpus of Picardy French showed the slightly higher figure of 4.4% (2000: 466). For Montreal French, Laberge reported a rate of 1.6% (1977: 132), and for Quebec City, Desahies found 0.5% (1991: 17).

<sup>24</sup> Various other factors have been invoked in discussions of the causes and chronology of the loss of the T forms in English: cf. Wales (1996), Taavitsainen and Jucker (2003), Gardner-Chloros (2003–4).

<sup>25</sup> Encrevé (2007) has observed recently that a part of President Sarkozy’s colloquial speech style includes using interjections such as *Attends!* even when he is addressing more than one person.

from variationist research in Montreal, in which a comparison was made between informal interviews recorded in 1971 and 1984 with the same group of informants (Thibault and Daveluy, 1989: 29; Thibault, 1991). Thibault and Daveluy examined the number of speakers who used *vous* or *tu* (or both), as address pronouns, and then did the same for users of *tu sais* and *vous savez*, as discourse markers. If one converts their raw figures to percentages, the trends are quite striking: between 1971 and 1984 the percentage of speakers consistently using *tu* in the interview rose by 22%, while the proportion of them consistently using *tu sais?* (as opposed to *vous savez?*) increased even more sharply, by 30%. As Thibault and Daveluy point out, it is very clear that a significant number of speakers used *tu sais?*, even though they addressed the interviewer with *V*. Thibault (1991: 88) similarly reports a massive rise in the use of *tu* with general indefinite reference (mainly at the expense of *on*, rather than *vous*, it has to be said): in the 1984 corpus, of all second-person subject pronouns used with indefinite reference, 96% were *tu*, and just 4% were *vous*. (But for the address function, the percentage of occurrences of *tu* was much lower, at 59%.) We do not yet have such clear ‘real-time’ evidence for the rise of *tu* in France, but Waugh *et al.* (2007) have reported that, in a corpus of informal speech from France and Switzerland, *tu* is by far the most frequent pronoun used for indefinite reference and that the discourse markers *tu sais?* and *tu vois?* are used to the total exclusion of their *V* equivalents.<sup>26</sup>

The general drift in the direction of *tutoiement* is not universally welcomed, since *T* is sometimes perceived as indicating an insufficient degree of respect towards an addressee. The government or other institutions may attempt to slow down or reverse the trend away from *vouvoiement*. For example, in May 2007 the newly appointed Minister of Education in President Sarkozy’s first government, Xavier Darcos, was reported as saying that it was indispensable for pupils to use *vous* when addressing their teacher, adding that teachers should preferably reciprocate.<sup>27</sup> In Quebec a recent survey of attitudes suggests that the vast majority of people feel the trend towards *T* has gone too far in certain domains. Results from the

<sup>26</sup> Some have speculated that the spread (though not the original introduction) of indefinite *tu* may be due to the influence of English indefinite *you*, especially in Quebec. This is a possibility, but Laberge (1977) found the change towards *tu* (and away from *on*) in Montreal was being led by working-class males born in the 1930s, who probably had less intensive contact with English than did other sections of society (Coveney, 2003: 173). However the recent rise of the indefinite use of second-person pronouns in other languages, such as German (p.c. Kim Schulte), suggests that English influence may be a significant factor in such cases. It is also conceivable that the absence of a polite/familiar second-person contrast in English may be influencing other languages to move in the same direction, albeit by abandoning singular *V* (rather than *T*, as English has done). This could be seen as part of an international trend towards greater informality (cf. Hickey and Stewart, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> [http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/speciales/politique/elections\\_2007/20070522.OBS8310/xavier\\_darcos\\_juge\\_indispensablele\\_vouvoiement\\_en\\_class.html](http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/speciales/politique/elections_2007/20070522.OBS8310/xavier_darcos_juge_indispensablele_vouvoiement_en_class.html) Darcos’s call was perhaps prompted by Nicolas Sarkozy’s criticism, during the 2007 Presidential campaign, of the heritage of *mai 68* (cf. *Libération*, 30 avril 2007).



questionnaire-based survey, conducted in 2004, found that 86.5% of respondents (N = 1,590) considered it unacceptable for customers in shops, regardless of their age, to be addressed with T. Similarly 84.7% (N = 1,583) found it unacceptable for staff in convalescent or retirement homes to use T towards elderly residents (Maurais, 2007: 89). However it is not at all certain that such attitudes, either among the general public or within the government of the day, will actually change people's linguistic behaviour.

#### CONCLUSION

The relative paucity of investigations of T/V conducted by French scholars on their own language may be due in part to a perception that the topic belongs more properly to other social sciences than to sociolinguistics or linguistics. A good deal of research on T/V has nevertheless been published, especially by scholars based outside France, and it has involved a wide range of different methods, types of data and analytical frameworks. The recent use of focus groups has proved to be particularly fruitful. Nevertheless there has still been little direct observation of actual usage in spoken French, and the process of acquisition of *vouvoisement* by children appears not to have been investigated in depth. The theories of Politeness, Acts of Identity and Audience Design have each helped to shed further light on various aspects of T/V behaviour. I have argued that the non-probabilistic nature of T/V sets it apart from other sociolinguistic variables, and that a consideration of various senses of 'markedness' suggests there is a strong case for seeing T, not V, as the unmarked variant. Although caution is always necessary when interpreting long-term historical trends in a language, the general loss of inflections in French suggests that *vouvoisement* is much more likely to disappear than is *tutoiement*. Indeed, from a sociolinguistic perspective one could reasonably claim that V already has only a very marginal foothold in the vernacular variety that is transmitted orally to each generation of young children.

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