

Second-person pronoun use in French language discussion fora

LAWRENCE WILLIAMS

University of North Texas

RÉMI A. VAN COMPERNOLLE

The Pennsylvania State University

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of second-person pronouns in on-line French language discussion fora, with specific focus on *Doctissimo* and *Meilleur du chef*, two fora from which approximately 400,000 words were collected for this corpus. Two hundred discussion threads (i.e., series of linked postings), with a minimum of fifteen postings (i.e., messages) and a maximum of twenty per thread, were analysed in three different ways in order to determine whether *tu*, *vous*-singular, or neither could be considered the default address pronoun. The results of the analysis suggest that while *tu* is clearly preferred in many cases, its use has not become systematic.

I INTRODUCTION

The present article explores patterns of use and variation of the address pronouns *tu* (T) and *vous*-singular (Vsg) in on-line French language discussion fora in order to determine to what extent one or the other of these pronouns is preferred or might function as a default form. This study is based on the working hypothesis—based on comparisons with traditional communicative interaction—that Vsg should emerge as the dominant address pronoun since strangers most often tend to use Vsg with each other, even though the use of T is considered more common in certain parts of the francophone world in some contexts (e.g., Québec). However, given that these discussion fora are available to anyone with an Internet connection, there is no way of knowing if some or all participants are acquaintances or if they live in any specific region of the (francophone) world. Not being able to consider as variables the social factors typically included in any study of sociopragmatic features of language is certainly a limitation of this study; however, it is important to note that participants accept this lack of social information as part of the communicative context and must base their choices regarding T and V use on either off-line parameters or their knowledge of address pronouns in on-line contexts in general or in discussion fora specifically.

There is limited evidence that T use is accepted as a default form in real-time chat, even among participants who do not know each other (Williams & van Compernelle, 2007). Since this finding contradicts our working hypothesis about T and V use on-line and specifically in discussion fora, our primary goal is to quantify second-person pronoun use in order to establish a baseline for comparisons with future studies of different fora and other types of electronic French discourse. Our secondary goal is to explore anomalies in the patterns revealed by the frequencies in our corpus. As such, our research questions are the following: 1) To what extent, if at all, has pragmatic leveling of second-person pronouns (in favor of T) occurred in discussion fora, compared to what has been reported for synchronous chat? and 2) To what extent is the use (i.e., frequency) of T versus Vsg consistent within a single forum and between two fora with different themes and topics (and with presumably different participants)?

In this article we argue that two primary factors influence T and V use in discussion fora. The first of these is the medium itself (i.e., the technological affordances and constraints of discussion fora). Each discussion forum has several series of messages that are linked together as a thread dealing with (normally) a single topic. Participants can choose to read all, some, or none of the messages in a thread before adding a new message to the series, which means that they may have no idea that in this electronic environment where social indexicality is at times greatly reduced, symmetrical T use has become widely accepted and perhaps expected. The second factor influencing T and V use in discussion fora is each participant's preference to maintain a traditional, off-line paradigm instead of the on-line system of address pronoun use that has emerged in synchronous chat and discussion fora. This is indeed only a matter of preference or choice if the participant happens to be familiar with patterns of use in certain types of on-line communication.

2 BACKGROUND

Throughout their existence, *tu* and *vous* have demonstrated a certain amount of instability and have undergone pragmatic shifts most notably between Old French and Middle French, during the period surrounding the French Revolution, and during the postwar era in the 20th century, especially following the events of May 1968. More recently, the development of new modes and structures of communication and discourse during the Digital Age has resulted in what seems to be the next major period of changes in use for at least some elements of the French pronoun paradigm.

2.1 *Power and solidarity*

Some of the earliest work in this area by Gilman and Brown (1958) and Brown and Gilman (1960) has remained for many years very influential. Their use and development of the concepts of power and solidarity as the main way of categorising relationships for this type of analysis is still an important point of reference even

today, perhaps because these categories summarise rather efficiently and succinctly the complex second-person pronoun system, at least for some languages in certain contexts. One of the drawbacks of their work is that the majority of it is based on participants' self-reported survey data instead of a corpus of actual language use, which might have revealed more levels or types of variation among contexts and participants. Although self-reported questionnaire data might not be ideal, it seems nonetheless reasonable to suggest that '[a]ddress behavior is much easier for speakers to recollect than, e.g., to give an account of their selection of phonetic variants' (Braun, 1988: 71). In spite of these or any other methodological shortcomings, it is clear that early studies of address forms have played a valuable role in research in linguistics and its various sub-fields, as well as related disciplines, by initiating inquiry in this area and demonstrating many of the complexities of second-person pronouns and other address forms.

2.2 Social indexicality

Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990) and Morford (1997), among others, argue that while earlier analyses of second-person pronouns have helped to advance this area of inquiry, an analysis such as the one proposed by Brown and Gilman (1960) accepts relationships of power, for example, as monolithic or static and comparable across social classes or groups that are necessarily dynamic and constantly evolving over time and in different settings. Morford (1997) therefore advocates the use of a new framework based on social indexicality, an approach she refers to as being more semiotic than semantic. This more recent framework includes what Silverstein (1992; 1996) calls orders of indexicality, which have the following properties: 'first and most straightforwardly, the capacity to "index," or point to, the relative formality of settings and occasions, as well as degrees of deference and / or intimacy between the speaker and addressee; and second, the capacity to signal certain aspects of an individual speaker's identity within the wider social order' (Morford, 1997: 5). This framework allows any feature in the immediate context of the communicative act or setting to be viewed as more or less dominant or important (or perceived as such by one or more interlocutors) in relation to a second set of factors that are always present (e.g., age, gender, social class, gender, group membership, etc.), which Morford refers to as 'macrosociological variables' (1997: 7).

Gardner-Chloros (1997), following Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), adopts a similar approach by focusing on the T/V choice as an 'act of identity' (106–107). It is quite clear even in Gardner-Chloros' small focus group of six participants that T/V use is not based on specific rules, but rather on how they perceive themselves in relationship to others. 'T/V choices are intimately linked to the projection of their personal and social identity and affiliations, and correspondingly little constrained by external conventions' (Gardner-Chloros, 1997: 115). The complexities involved in T/V choice (in work/professional settings) have also been demonstrated by Warren (2006), who conducted a study using individual interviews with participants in the same self-reported social network (16 in Paris, 11 in Toulouse) as a method

of data collection. It is clear in both studies that there are no absolute rules used by native speakers to decide which address pronoun to use. Instead, people make assessments for each context based on their knowledge of and past experiences with their interlocutors as well as the presence of others, whether they be expected or only potential interlocutors.

The work by Gardner-Chloros (1997), Morford (1997), Warren (2006), and others is based on traditional contexts and notions of communication in which macrosociological (e.g., social class, age, occupation, and so forth) variables are usually known or at least obvious. However, in computer-mediated communication the pieces of information that allow interlocutors to understand the macrosociological variables are not present or obvious, and even when they might appear to be so, they are not verifiable. We therefore prefer to use as our main point of comparison the use of T and V in other electronic environments where social indexicality can also be greatly reduced and where communication is also typed (i.e., text-based).

2.3 *Social indexicality in computer-mediated communication*

As a relatively new type of discourse, computer-mediated communication presents potentially difficult challenges related to social indexicality. Many of the macrosociological variables that are obvious in traditional written and spoken types of discourse are not available or accessible in the context of a discussion forum. For example, even in cases where users can create profiles for other community members to see, there is simply no way to know how accurate the information may or may not be. (In fact, users often 'introduce' themselves to people in the forum in order to explain who they are since they are using a spouse's or friend's account to post a message because they can't remember their own password or have been blocked.) The fact that speakers have little or no knowledge of the macrosociological background of their interlocutors could result in the random use of second-person pronouns; however, it could also cause participants to be overly cautious or polite so as not to risk offending anyone with too much familiarity too soon. Another possible outcome would be the generalised and almost exclusive use of T if users collectively view their communication environment as one with reduced, unreliable, or absent macrosociological variables.

In an article analysing T and Vsg in electronic discourse (specifically, synchronous chat), generalised T use was the major finding reported by Williams and van Compernelle (2007). Their analysis revealed an extremely high (i.e., up to 99%) rate of T, with virtually no tokens of Vsg when marked, ludic (e.g., jokes, role-playing with levity, imitations, and so forth) occurrences were coded separately. Their findings suggest that our working hypothesis (based on traditional, off-line communicative interaction) that Vsg should emerge as the address pronoun of preference may very well prove to be misguided. It then appears that two hypotheses have emerged: one based on limited evidence in synchronous chat that pragmatic

leveling of address pronouns (in favor of T) has occurred and the other based on a traditional, off-line paradigm of T/V use.

As stated above, we argue that technological affordances and constraints influence T and V use since discussion fora participants can read all, some, or none of the postings in any given discussion forum thread. Although it could be said of synchronous chat that participants do not have to follow every part of the discussion, the medium of synchronous chat lends itself more toward encouraging participants to read every message since all turns are present on the screen at the same time, and participants know that eventually the lines at the top of the screen will disappear as more turns appear on the bottom of the screen. Any participant who does not follow a synchronous chat will have some difficulty piecing together the various conversational strands since many participants divide a single turn into two parts for the sake of efficiency and many adjacency pairs—in the traditional sense—are not actually adjacent (e.g., questions and answers; see Herring, 1999). Since participants in synchronous chat have a greater need to follow the entirety of the conversation, they will at least have access to the nearly exclusive use of T, even if they might not all notice it right away or scrutinise second-person pronoun use in depth. Nonetheless, there is evidence that the synchronous nature of chat allows users to notice patterns and salient features since the entirety of the conversation is available to them. For example, Williams and van Compernelle (2007: 810–811) explain that in the two cases of (unmarked, non-proverbial, non-joking) Vsg use in their corpus of synchronous chat, both participants switch to systematic T use relatively shortly after entering the room. Whether the initial use of Vsg and the subsequent use of T was due to their noticing of the patterns in the discourse remains impossible to tell; however, the medium itself and participants' preference for a traditional, off-line paradigm or one based on the discourse often found in on-line contexts seem to be the factors with the greatest potential for influencing language use and variation.

3 METHOD

Doctissimo and *Meilleur du chef* are separate web sites, and the discussion fora are only one type of product or service, among many, available to visitors and members. These two sites were chosen for the present study primarily for two reasons: 1) their similarity in organisational structure; and 2) availability of large amounts of data.

3.1 *The corpus*

Table 1 provides an overview of the corpus used for the current study. In each half (*Doctissimo* and *Meilleur du chef*) of the corpus, four topics were selected randomly from the topics that had a minimum of twenty-five threads and a minimum of fifteen postings in each of these threads. For our analysis in the present study, nothing past the twentieth turn in any given thread was analysed since there is a

Table 1. Overview of the corpus

Doctissimo			
Topics	No. Threads Analyzed	No. Postings Analyzed	Approximate No. Words
Accidents sportifs	25	500	48,500
Drogues	25	500	47,000
Famille	25	500	45,500
Médicaments	25	500	49,000
Doctissimo Total	100	2,000	190,000
Meilleur du chef (MC)			
Topics	No. Threads Analyzed	No. Postings Analyzed	Approximate No. Words
Apprentis cuisiniers	25	487	52,000
Diététique et régimes	25	500	45,000
Matériel de cuisine	25	499	50,000
Trucs et astuces	25	500	40,000
MC Total	100	1,986	187,000
Entire Corpus			
Data Sets	No. Threads Analyzed	No. Postings Analyzed	Approximate No. Words
Doctissimo & MC	200	3,986	377,000

wide range of the number of threads among the various topics of discussion, and our cursory examination of turns past the twentieth revealed that any patterns that had emerged remained, for the most part, very consistent regardless of the length of the thread. Incidentally, Lewis (2005) also found that the average number of postings seemed to be twenty, so she also took into account only the first twenty postings in the discussion threads selected for her analysis.

As seen in the third column of Table 1, only two topics in *Meilleur du chef* did not have at least twenty postings in some threads, which resulted in totals for those two topics falling short of 500 postings. However, all the threads had our self-imposed minimum of fifteen postings.

3.2 Coding tokens

Since the analysis in the present study focuses on T and Vsg when used as subject pronouns, all non-subject-pronoun forms were excluded during the first step of the coding process. Next, all tokens of V were coded independently by each author as Vsg or *vous*-plural (Vpl). Since 38 of 915 tokens were not coded the same by each author, they were set aside for further review. Two of these tokens were discovered to be clear instances of Vsg, which had not been apparent at first because in each case a forum participant had (perhaps unintentionally) replied to the original posting in a thread by replying to a reply to the original posting instead of replying to the original posting itself. The other 36 tokens for which the independent coding of

each author did not match were reviewed by a colleague from (western) France, who suggested that these instances should be coded as Vpl. Her suggestion to do this was based on a notion that the typical person reading such messages might view them as plural since he or she would not take the time to analyze second-person pronoun use in all postings of any given thread, as the authors had done for this study. This led to a discussion revealing that the differences in coding were based on one author's decision to read each posting as a direct reply to the previous posting (which is what some users would do when reading a threaded discussion) and the other author's decision to find the posting to which the message was actually a reply (which is what other users would do if they had been following the threaded discussion on an hourly or daily basis as each message was added). Once the authors understood why some coding-related discrepancies had occurred, it became clear that the tokens that had been set aside should all be coded as Vpl, thereby excluding them from the analysis in the present article.

Tokens of T and Vsg were not divided into categories of definite versus indefinite reference for the present study. Such coding was not undertaken since either T or Vsg can be used for both types of reference. Ashby (1992: 143), for example, found that indefinite second-person pronoun use happened to match interviewees' use of Vsg with him, and the same was reported by Coveney (2003) and Fonseca-Greber and Waugh (2003) for T use. Incidentally, a full analysis of pronouns used for indefinite reference is not one of the goals of this article, but an analysis of pronouns used with indefinite reference (i.e., T and V as well as *on*) has already been planned as a separate article as part of our larger research agenda.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Overall distribution of second-person subject pronouns

The overall distribution of second-person subject pronouns is provided in Table 2. The last column shows the percentage of T tokens compared only to Vsg tokens, since this is the main focus of our analysis. In the *Doctissimo* data, three of the four topics have a relatively high rate of T vs. Vsg, ranging from 91.8% to 98.6%. In the *médicaments* data set, the percentage of T (vs. Vsg) was noticeably lower, at 66.5%. Nonetheless, when all four data sets were combined, the average rate of T vs. Vsg turned out to be relatively high, at 91.5%.

During a re-examination of the *médicaments* data set, it became apparent that this anomaly occurred due to relatively high rates of participation by pharmacists, doctors, and other professionals addressing and giving advice to non-professionals (i.e., lay persons who have the role of customer or patient). Excerpt 1 provides an example of this type of exchange from a discussion thread entitled *y'a t'il un pharmacien pour un renseignement?* In this case, the self-identified expert in this dyad—pat182—ends his or her posting with the phrase *Le conseil du Pharmacien est gratuit*, which indicates his/her status as an expert qualified to provide accurate information. (Readers should note that *sic* has not been added where errors or

Table 2. *Distribution of second-person subject pronouns*

Overall distribution for Doctissimo				
Data Set	T	Vsg	Vpl	% T (vs. Vsg)
Accidents	365	20	75	94.8%
Drogues	410	6	29	98.6%
Famille	234	21	51	91.8%
Médicaments	115	58	14	66.5%
Total	1,124	105	169	91.5%
Overall distribution for Meilleur du chef (MC)				
Data Set	T	Vsg	Vpl	% T (vs. Vsg)
Apprentis cuisiniers	418	79	82	84.1%
Dietétique et régimes	329	70	87	82.5%
Matériel de cuisine	117	110	119	51.5%
Trucs et astuces	248	45	49	84.6%
Total	1,112	304	337	78.5%
Entire Corpus				
	T	Vsg	Vpl	% T (vs. Vsg)
Doctissimo & MC	2,236	409	506	84.5%

'non-standard' forms have been used. The excerpts were reproduced directly from the archived text files.)

Excerpt 1, Doctissimo/Médicaments

Nom: jacky37

Posté le 28-11-2006 à 15:34:36

bonjour, si un pharmacien veut bien répondre a ma question . . .

voilà, j'aimerais savoir: lorsque l'on achète un médicament avec ordonnance, le fabriquant de ce médicament a t'il l'information de la personne qui a acheté ce médicament et du lieu de son achat?

Nom: pat182

Posté le 28-11-2006 à 16:07:30

Un produit sur ordonnance et Listé est inscrit sur un ordonnancier à la pharmacie. Avec: la date, le prescripteur, le patient, le(s) médicament(s) et le numero d'ordonnancier.

Ces infos sont accessibles à la caisse de sécurité sociale qui vous concerne (vérification des produits délivrés)

Je ne pense pas qu'un laboratoire puisse savoir (secret médical) et je ne vois pas pourquoi il voudrait le savoir.

Pourquoi avez-vous si peur?

.....

Le conseil du Pharmacien est gratuit

Although it is impossible to verify the actual titles and professional degrees held by those who identified themselves as medical experts, the increased presence of expert–novice or professional–lay person dyads is the only clear difference between the *médicaments* data set and the other three. In this case, social indexicality (Morford, 1997) among the participants remained explicit and present. The salient features typically present in non–electronic (i.e., traditional) communication were not absorbed or neutralised by this type of environment, which is usually considered to offer a high level of anonymity and, by extension, equality among people from different age groups, social classes, professions, and communities (see Lee, 1995; Herring, 1996; Hearn, Mandeville, & Anthony, 1998).

Although the percentages of T vs. Vsg in the *Meilleur du chef* data sets were consistently lower than those in the *Doctissimo* data sets, there is a clear pattern with an average in the lower 80% range. In this group of data sets there is also one outlier, namely *matériel de cuisine*, at 51.5%. A re-reading of this data set revealed very high rates of new participants who made relatively few postings. It is possible that such participants—who only visited the forum once or sometimes twice—simply were not aware that T was a relatively common form of address in some types of relatively anonymous on-line communication, such as synchronous chat, as demonstrated in Williams and van Compernelle (2007).

Although there was an anomaly in each half of the corpus, it is clear that T enjoys relatively wide use in *Doctissimo* and *Meilleur du chef*, at an overall rate of 84.5% when compared to Vsg. It is important to note that the overall distribution only provides the most general level of analysis since many tokens of T were used by participants who had known each other (presumably only on-line, but perhaps off-line too) for some time or had clearly established some kind of professional or personal relationship. Our next level of analysis therefore focuses on the first five turns in each of the 200 discussion threads selected for the present study.

4.2 T/V use in the first five postings

The typical pattern for the first five turns is the following: 1) question from initiator; 2) initial response to initiator, which may or may not include a definitive answer or piece of advice; 3) follow-up question or ‘thank you’ message from initiator to initial responder; 4) additional comment or question from second (i.e., new) responder to initiator or initial responder; 5) reply from the person addressed in Turn 4. After the fifth turn, there is a tendency for multiple new responders to post additional questions or provide answers related to the original question from the initiator. It is important to note that even though new postings indicate to whom (or to which message) the poster is replying, this indication can be misleading since the *Répondre* button next to all messages in the thread can be used in order to create a new posting as a response to any message. We have therefore chosen to focus on Turns 1–5 because the directionality of messages and intended addressees are much easier to determine in the earlier postings of any given discussion strand.

Table 3. *Pronominal Forms of Address in Turns 1–5*

		Doctissimo							
	T	T %	Vsg	Vsg %	Vpl	Vpl %	Ø ¹	Ø %	
Turn 1	3	3.00%	0	0.00%	61	61.00%	36	36.00%	
Turn 2	52	52.00%	11	11.00%	5	5.00%	32	32.00%	
Turn 3	50	50.00%	11	11.00%	5	5.00%	34	34.00%	
Turn 4	39	39.00%	8	8.00%	8	8.00%	45	45.00%	
Turn 5	41	41.00%	6	6.00%	8	8.00%	45	45.00%	
DOC Total	185	37.00%	36	7.20%	87	17.40%	192	38.40%	
		Meilleur du chef							
	T	T %	Vsg	Vsg %	Vpl	Vpl %	Ø	Ø %	
Turn 1	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	53	53.00%	47	47.00%	
Turn 2	35	35.00%	19	19.00%	8	8.00%	38	38.00%	
Turn 3	54	54.00%	20	20.00%	3	3.00%	23	23.00%	
Turn 4	44	44.00%	17	17.00%	8	8.00%	31	31.00%	
Turn 5	41	41.00%	20	20.00%	11	11.00%	28	28.00%	
MC Total	174	34.80%	76	15.20%	83	16.60%	167	33.40%	

Since the first turn in almost all new threads is a message to anyone and everyone who might happen to read the posting, it is not surprising to find that almost 100% of all subject pronouns in Turn 1 were either Vpl or non-second-person pronouns, as shown in Table 3.² The only exception to this pattern is Turn 1 in the *Doctissimo* data, where three instances of T were used. This occurred only because in these three cases, a participant decided to create (or did so accidentally) a new discussion thread as a continuation of an existing thread.

In the data from both *Doctissimo* and *Meilleur du chef*, the rate of non-second-person subject pronoun use remains relatively steady, with no large fluctuations between specific turns. There is a seemingly equal probability of finding first- and third-person subject pronouns in any turn since a large portion of every data set includes stories related to personal experiences or information about people and things that they want to relay to other participants. However, the T and Vsg data increase from zero (or almost zero) in Turn 1 to a rate in Turn 2 that remains relatively stable in Turns 3–5. The reverse pattern is found for Vpl, which shows a decrease between Turns 1 and 2, yet consistency is also found from Turn 2 until Turn 5.

Table 3 also shows that in the *Doctissimo* data, T is used almost five (Turns 2–4) or seven (Turn 5) times as often as Vsg, which produces a combined total of 36

¹ The null symbol (Ø) is used as a label for the non-second-person subject pronoun category.

² The numbers reported in Table 3 refer to the frequency of postings in which T or V was used, irrespective of the number of tokens of T or V found in any single posting (i.e., the choice of T or V instead of how many times each was written). This was done in order to avoid skewing the data given that some postings included only one token of T or V, while others contained several.

tokens for Vsg and 185 for T. In the *Meilleur du chef* data, T is used almost twice (Turn 2) or more than twice (turns 3–5) as often as Vsg, with a total of 76 tokens of Vsg and 174 of T. The consistent rates of second-person pronoun use within each half of the corpus suggest that rates will vary from forum to forum and that, regardless of the rate of T or Vsg use, participants are able to adjust to expected patterns of use based on what they observe as they read through the various discussion threads and formulate replies. Excerpt 3 demonstrates how a participant aligns himself/herself with his/her interlocutor (in Turns 4 and 6, where *tutoiement* is introduced and maintained) in order to establish and maintain a symmetrical relationship.

Excerpt 3, Meilleur du chef/Apprentis cuisiniers

[Turn 3]

Re: CAP à Ferrandi

De: Panda77

En réponse à vero94

Bonjour, Je vous recommande cet excellent blog créé par une jeune femme qui vient tout juste de terminer sa formation en CAP cuisine à l'école Ferrandi. Souhaitant moi-même intégrer l'école en janvier prochain, j'y ai trouvé des indications précieuses.

[*blog address*]

Bien cordialement

[Turn 4]

Re: CAP à Ferrandi

De: vero94

En réponse à Panda77

Merci pour ton tuyau !

si.. l'école me prend, si.. le fongecif finance la formation je démarrerai aussi en janvier.

Tu vas à la journée du 22 juin ?

[Turn 6]

Re: CAP à Ferrandi

De: Panda77

En réponse à vero94

Bonsoir, J'ai envoyé mon bulletin d'inscription il y a quelques jours seulement et n'ai pas encore reçu de réponse de l'école. Pourrais-tu me dire en quoi consiste cette journée du 22 juin?

In addition, at least one instance in which a symmetrical V relationship changed to T included an explicit request for T on the part of one participant, as shown in Excerpt 4. Incidentally, this comment was not made until the 11th posting, before which reciprocal Vsg had dominated the discussion.

Excerpt 4, Doctissimo/Médicaments

De: zaza24

Posté le 22-04-2006 à 15:23:52

vous pouvez me tutooyer

je me sens gênée

salut

This explicit request for T illustrates the degree to which T has become widely accepted, and perhaps expected, in discussion fora, at least within the fora observed in this study. It is clear that zaza24 is uncomfortable when addressed as Vsg, which is shown by this admission: *je me sens gênée*. Further, this issue is important enough for zaza24 to dedicate a separate message to it, which means that it was not simply a passing thought hastily added to the end of a posting with content related to the topic. Incidentally, no examples of an explicit request for *tutoiement* or *vouvoiement* were found in the *Meilleur du chef* data, but this is not too surprising since Vsg use was consistently more frequent in that half of the corpus even though Vsg use was by no means generalised or systematic. Although it might be the case that zaza24's request for T indicates that T is not widely accepted or expected in discussion fora, it is important to note that the participants in these fora still have individual ideas and practices that have not yet converged as universal norms of T/V use for all discussion fora, which seems to have occurred in synchronous chat, as reported by Williams and van Compernelle (2007). In any case, there were no requests for Vsg use.

The only clear example of symmetry being established and maintained by means of a switch from non-reciprocal T/Vsg to Vsg/Vsg is reproduced below in Excerpt 5. In this case, although a participant used T when addressing a moderator, the discussion forum's customer service policy might require moderators to address all participants with Vsg. This appears to be the case since every posting from an administrator to a single individual includes Vsg, never T, even after more than one exchange (which could be considered making one's acquaintance). Another possible explanation for the use of Vsg on the part of moderators is that they have the power to ban individual screen names and/or messages originating from specific Internet connections in cases where a participant has repeatedly broken the rules of expected behavior and netiquette established by the website and/or the members of its community. Therefore, moderators exert a certain degree of control over the forum participants, and, since they represent the company or website, they may wish to show social distance and/or a distinction between regular participants and themselves. Due to the low frequency of interventions by moderators, it was not possible to measure with any confidence the degree to which their use of second-person subject pronouns tends to vary.

Excerpt 5, Doctissimo/Médicaments

[Turn 1]

De: beblog

Posté le 20-06-2007 à 22:51:56

Je te supplie de déban mon adresse IP
je suis vivi210
bien peu de choses mais je te représente mes excuses à toi et les autres modérateurs
[. . .] merci de m'avoir entendue/lue

[Turn 2]

De: Le modérateur

Posté le 21-06-2007 à 10:59:13

Vivi,

Avec quel pseudo souhaitez vous surfer, et quel problème rencontrez vous ?

Quel message d'erreur ?

Cordialement.

LM (ex Mod2)

Instead of creating a symmetrical relationship with the participant, the moderator in Excerpt 5 initiated the use of *Vsg*, thereby giving the participant a chance to align with the moderator or maintain an asymmetrical relationship. The initiator, *vivi210*, apparently noticed the *vouvoiement* from the moderator because she switched to *Vsg* in all messages following Turn 2. The examples in Excerpts 3 and 5 illustrate the preference for symmetrical relationships, which would be considered a display of solidarity (at least on the part of *vivi210*, who had to make a decision regarding alignment with the moderator) in Brown and Gilman's (1960) terms, since the participants end up using the same form of address. Within the framework proposed by Morford (1997), this could be viewed as social indexicality that is flexible enough for the participants to adjust to the context as they see fit, without necessarily feeling 'trapped' in one of only two categories of power or solidarity, especially since these particular discussion fora do not indicate a preference for *T* or *Vsg* use in their rules for participants. In discussion fora, apart from member-initiated declarations of hierarchical relationships (e.g., expert-novice, teacher-student, doctor-patient, and so forth), the only type of obvious and inherent asymmetry is that of moderator-participant. Even so, the moderator—at least in this case—did not scold *vivi210* for using *T*, but neither did the moderator tell her that she should feel free to use whichever pronoun of address she preferred. The treatment of second-person pronoun switching seems, therefore, to be a non-issue, at least in this type of interaction. Moderators are most likely somewhat familiar with the types of on-line communities that they oversee, and they are therefore certainly aware that *T* use has become relatively widespread, or at least common enough so that it should not be perceived as insulting or demeaning.

4.3 T or Vsg dominance beyond the first five postings

In order to demonstrate the dominance of *T* vs. *Vsg*, we now proceed to a third level of analysis that involves determining the primary second-person subject pronoun in every discussion thread in our corpus. This provides an overview of the strength

Table 4. Analysis of dominant pronoun in all threads

Doctissimo (DOC)							
Data Set	T	T %	Vsg	Vsg %	Mix	Mix %	Total
Accidents	18	72%	0	0%	7	28%	25
Drogues	24	96%	0	0%	1	4%	25
Famille	22	88%	0	0%	3	12%	25
Médicaments	11	44%	5	20.0%	9	36%	25
Total	75	75%	5	5%	20	20%	100
Meilleur du chef (MC)							
Data Set	T	T %	Vsg	Vsg %	Mix	Mix %	Total
Apprentis	14	56%	4	16%	7	28%	25
Diététique	12	48%	2	8%	11	44%	25
Matériel	7	28%	11	44%	7	28%	25
Trucs	18	72%	2	8%	5	20%	25
Total	51	51%	19	19%	30	30%	100
Entire Corpus							
	T	T %	Vsg	Vsg %	Mix	Mix %	Total
DOC & MC	126	63%	24	12%	50	25%	200

and presence of T or Vsg by indicating only whether one pronoun or the other dominated, or if no clear system or pattern of use could be determined, in which case the thread was included in the *mix* category. An overview of dominant second-person singular subject pronouns is provided below in Table 4, which contains results similar to those reported in Table 2 (i.e., the overall distribution), namely that there is one data set in each half of the corpus that appears to be quite different from the other three: *Médicaments* in *Doctissimo* and *Matériel de cuisine* in *Meilleur du chef*. The general dominance of Vsg in a relatively higher number of threads in these two topic areas suggests that the overall distribution of second-person pronouns provided in Table 2 was indeed a good indication that Vsg tokens were used throughout the various strands of these topics instead of simply being used in high concentrations by a certain number of users in parts of a few discussion threads.

The data in Table 4 also suggest that while T use is dominant in the entire corpus, the mix of T and Vsg (with neither being dominant enough to create a pattern indicating generalised use) is actually more common than Vsg. This finding reveals a somewhat unexpected result since forum participants are often compared to members of electronic communities or Communities of Practice (see Lave & Wenger, 1991) that exist and evolve on line, and as such it seems reasonable to imagine that they would be able to arrive at a consensus or at least recognize a trend as obvious as the dominance of T. It is nonetheless possible, of course, that discussion fora share many features with Communities of Practice, even if second-person pronoun use is not one of them. Although the *mix* category appears

to be relatively common, cases in which no clear pattern of use emerged were typically discussion threads in which numerous people posted additional questions similar to what would be expected in the initial posting of a thread. On some level, therefore, these threads might almost be thought of as multiple discussions within one discussion, and in many cases, there were few replies to individuals.

For this analysis of turns past the first five, it is important to note that T was identified in some cases as the dominant pronoun only because participants who all clearly knew each other were exchanging messages, almost as if they were having a private discussion. However, we are confident that this was not always the case since there is ample evidence that new participants (i.e., strangers) engaged in reciprocal T use beginning with their initial interactions. One example of this is shown in Excerpt 5, which demonstrates how Soleil51 (who signs her posting as *sylvie*) welcomes *kiiiwi* then initiates a T relationship as she explains about diet products and where they can be purchased.

Excerpt 6, Meilleur du chef/Diététique et régimes

[Turn 6]

Re: 19kg900 semaine 11

De: Soleil51

En réponse à: *kiiiwi*

bonjour *kiiiwi* et bienvenue parmi nous!!

pour les conseils, on ne peut ke te proposer de te joindre a nous pour le regime!!
sab fleurbleue et moi on achete notre pro chez decathlon ou dans des boutiques dietetiques!

...

tu peux aussi faire ce regime avec des sachets mais ca revient tres cher!!

voila!! n'esites pas a venir nous parler!!

bises

sylvie

At first glance, Excerpt 6 might give the false impression that the absence of accents in all the discourse produced by Soleil51 correlates with a systematic use of T in discussion fora, as if these features both indicated some degree of informality. Due to a limited number of postings by Soleil51 (i.e., 6) in this forum, it is impossible to know how she normally addresses strangers other than *kiiiwi*, the only participant with whom Soleil51 used second-person pronouns. It is clear, however, that the absence of accents is not a reliable indicator of level or register since accents have seemingly disappeared not only in this type of communication but also in many other types of electronic environments. It is unfortunately impossible to know exactly how many other new participants were addressed with T since participants do not always indicate that it is their first visit to a forum. However, the fact that this can occur at all, with no reproach or rebuke of any kind, indicates that T use is accepted—at least in our corpus—even if it is not expected or used systematically by everyone.

5 CONCLUSION

Our analysis has provided an overview of French second-person pronoun use in a limited number of contexts in only one type of computer-mediated communication. The comparison of *Doctissimo* and *Meilleur du chef* has revealed some consistencies within each of these data sets and between them, such as the preference for T in the majority of cases, even though the rates of T and Vsg use are somewhat different in each forum. Nonetheless, it is clear that the rate of use of Vsg has by no means diminished to the point that it has in synchronous chat. It is important to recognise, however, that the present study is currently the only analysis of T/V use in discussion fora, and we have compared our results to the only published study of T/V use in synchronous chat. It is therefore obvious that very little is still known about these two types of electronic discourse, and even less is known about the people who produce this discourse. When it is impossible for participants to make a judgment regarding the social indexicality of any communicative context, they have to make choices—such as those involved in T/V use—based on either their background knowledge of traditional modes and mediums of communication or their knowledge of language-related expectations in on-line environments. Using a focus group (e.g., Gardner-Chloros, 1997; Warren, 2006) as a source of data would be the next logical step in the study of T/V choice in order to understand which groups or types of users tend to apply off-line communicative rules and parameters to on-line contexts and which ones recognise the peculiarities of computer-mediated communication environments.

Further research is certainly needed not only in a greater number of discussion fora, but also in other electronic communication environments. Factors such as the type (i.e., general or specific) of forum or its theme(s), the rules provided by the administrators, or the participants' longevity of membership and frequency of activity could indeed provide valuable insights regarding additional linguistic and social features of discussion fora. Although it is often difficult or simply not possible to collect reliable biographical or background information about participants in on-line communities (Paolillo, 2001: 181), there are indications or clues in some cases that could be gathered to create profiles of certain group members in order to produce more complete descriptions of and explanations for different types of variation and patterns of use. A cross-type investigation could also produce a better understanding of how the French pronoun paradigm is used in other types of electronic discourse such as blogs, chat, and even hypertext.

Future studies of address forms and systems in electronic communication environments should also seek to expand the focus of inquiry to include not only second-person pronouns, but other forms of address too. By doing so, it would be possible to provide more accurate descriptions of different parts of the pronoun paradigm as only one element in any address system. Busse notes that 'the forms of nominal and pronominal address do not work as separate systems but in unison, and they should hence not be reduced to a dichotomy' (2002: 22; see also Blake, 1990: 68). Although these comments were written in a study of Shakespeare's plays, Busse's argument refers to the more general notion that the

isolation of related elements within a system can only provide a partial analysis of the broader communicative context. Ervin-Tripp (1972: 236) advocates going even further. 'One must look beyond the address system for independent social features correlated with address systems of a defined type'. Studies of the entire address system, and other related features, in discussion fora have great potential for revealing many obvious and subtle differences between traditional and electronic types of discourse since the format of certain features, such as the screen name of the poster of a message and additional pieces of information, are determined by the software used as the interface.

As new types of software and networking capabilities are developed, French second-person pronoun use will certainly remain in flux. However, since computer-mediated communication does not exist separately and independently from non-electronic environments, we do not expect any drastic changes in the French address system to occur independently of what takes place in traditional (spoken and written) discourse; rather, it seems reasonable to presume that ever-changing social values and norms will lead to concomitant shifts in the French pronoun paradigm in both settings.

Authors' addresses:

Lawrence Williams

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

University of North Texas

PO Box 311127

Denton, TX 76203-1127

USA

E-mail: lawrence.williams@unt.edu

Rémi A. van Compernelle

Department of French and Francophone Studies

The Pennsylvania State University

211 Burrowes Building

University Park, PA 16802

USA

E-mail: compernelle@gmail.com

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