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# (When) Can I say *Du* to You? The metapragmatics of forms of address on German-Speaking Twitter

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## Highlights

- The paper is an empirical paper on the metapragmatics of address forms in German based on Twitter data.
- The paper explores how people react to the switch to the T-form to address customers.
- The paper is of interest to anyone dealing with politeness, appropriateness norms, or pronoun choice in online communities.
- The paper opens new avenues on the research on colloquialization and globalization in online communities.

## Abstract

On 02.06.2020, the social media team of the Deutsche Bahn, the German railway company, announced on Twitter that for a three-month launching phase, they would use the singular T-form *du* to address their customers. On the basis of a corpus of public tweets analyzed as metapragmatic comments, I examine which stances users adopt and what these stances tell us about how the German-speaking Twittersphere metapragmatically assesses the appropriateness of pronouns of address in social networks. I show how the shift to the T-form is well accepted only if restricted to Twitter, while being strongly disfavored and deemed inappropriate if understood against the background of a customer-client's relation. While the users in favor of the V-form present their arguments in a direct way, most users who plead for the T-form resort to irony and banter, thus constructing the online persona of 'cool' people aware of appropriateness norms on social media. I conclude by showing how the clash between antagonistic — and possibly irreconcilable — positions can then be framed as a conflict between globalized norms fostering the use of T-forms as a conventionalized practice on social media and local norms of politeness, as the V-form remains the unmarked way of addressing an unknown adult in Germany.

## Keywords

address forms – pronouns – T/V forms – metapragmatics – stances – social media – Twitter – politeness – appropriateness – globalization – colloquialization

## 1. Introduction

„Bitte ab jetzt auf twitter nur noch Siezen“ (“Please only use *Sie* [pl. V-form] on Twitter from now on” — here is one of the (ironical) reactions when the social media team of the Deutsche Bahn (DB), the German railway company, announced on 02.06.2020 on Twitter that they would use the second person pronoun *du* (sg. T-form) to address their customers:

- (1) Es gibt Neuigkeiten! Für eine dreimonatige Testphase werden wir euch auf unserem Twitter-Kanal duzen 😊 Bisher haben wir hierzu unterschiedliches Feedback erhalten und möchten nun in dem Test neue Erfahrungen sammeln. Wir freuen uns darauf und sind gespannt auf euer Feedback :)

There is news! For a three-month test phase, we will be using *Du* [T-form, 2<sup>nd</sup> pers. sg.] on our Twitter channel 😊 So far, we have received different feedback on this, and now we would like to gather new experiences as a trial. We are looking forward to it and are excited about your feedback :)

The switch to the T-form *Du* is by no means a prerogative of the DB: It reflects a general trend in German media and advertising. For instance, the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG), the Berlin public transportation, is well known for its use of the T-form in its slogan *Weil wir dich lieben* ('Because we

love you’). Still, the tweet in (1) was followed by a series of reactions in the form of likes, comments, retweets, and quoted tweets. While the 4351 likes and 129 retweets<sup>1</sup>, as purely metric indications, do not allow for a metapragmatic assessment of the norms of politeness on social media, the 143 quoted tweets as well as the 290 replies build the core of this paper.

On the basis of this corpus of public reactions, I examine how Twitter users position express their approval or disagreement regarding the decision of the DB. Specifically, I ask: Which stances do users adopt when being told they will be addressed with the T-form by a customer service on social media? Stancetaking means “taking up a position with respect to the form or the content of one’s utterance” (Jaffe 2009: 1)—in this case, publicly reacting to the DB’s announcement. Going further, what do these stances tell us about how the German-speaking Twittersphere metapragmatically assesses the appropriateness of pronouns of address in social networks?

The paper is structured as follows. I show in the second section that the Twitter corpus consists of metapragmatic comments or stances that can be analyzed against the theoretical background of politeness studies and interpersonal pragmatics. The third section then presents previous research on T/V use on social media with a focus on German and on two interrelated phenomena that play a role in the use and metapragmatic assessment of address forms: globalization and digitalization. It is followed by a presentation of the corpus and a quantitative overview on which main positions are present in the corpus. The data analysis is handled in Sections 5 and 6. Through a qualitative analysis of all publicly posted reactions, it becomes clear that only two camps are represented in the metapragmatic evaluation of the phenomenon: contesting the DB’s decision, or endorsing it—but nothing in-between. Section 5 addresses the commercial *Sie* promoted by the users in favor of the V-form. Section 6, on the other hand, is devoted to the internet *Du* of the proponents on the T-form. I finally conclude that the “judgments of appropriateness” (Caffi 1994: 2461) towards address forms must be assessed against the background of broader trends such as colloquialization, globalization, and digitalization.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Metapragmatics and stancetaking

I propose to analyze the reactions to the DB’s announcement as metapragmatic comments, and, as they are public acts, as stances. Investigating *metapragmatics in use* means exploring “how interactants actually employ meta-utterances to intervene in ongoing discourse” (Hübler & Bublitz 2007: 1). As a special type of *reflexive language*, which “use[s] language to communicate about the activity of using language” (Lucy 1993: 9), “[m]etapragmatic acts, *inter alia*, assign (either explicitly or implicitly) particular pragmatic functions to speech acts or discourse types” (Hübler & Bublitz 2007: 3). Metapragmatic utterances thus not only comment on language (e.g. “One shouldn’t say ‘damn it’ in

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<sup>1</sup> As of 15.06.2021. Likes and retweets can (slightly) change over the time.

front of children” (Lucy 1993: 10)), but precisely address the pragmatic dimension of language, in this case the use of address forms in a specific community of practice on a given platform.

Because the metapragmatic comments on the DB’s announcement are publicly visible on social media, I further propose to analyze them as *stances*. In Du Bois’s widely shared words, a stance is:

a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means (language, gesture, and other symbolic forms), through which social actors simultaneously evaluate objects, position subjects (themselves and others), and align with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field. (Du Bois 2007: 169)

Exploring stances thus involves 1) examining which value is given to the object of interest (here the switch to the T-form); 2) how social actors (here, the Twitter users) position themselves with respect to this object; 3) how the social actors position themselves in regard to other stancetakers; 4) and finally which “presupposed systems of sociocultural value” are invoked through stancetaking (Du Bois 2007: 139). All four functions will be tackled in the analysis.

In this paper I use the terms *metapragmatic comments* or *stances* to refer to the tweets following the DB’s communication. The former characterizes any type of utterance reflecting on language use, while the latter emphasized its public dimension as well as its embeddedness into social structure. Although both terms are not synonyms, they partly overlap and both apply to the phenomenon under investigation, which is why I use them both in the present study.

## 2.2 Politeness and address forms

Address terms build a core area for the study of politeness (Kádár & Haugh 2013: 1). Central to the Twitter discussion on the use of address forms on social media is thus how stancetakers conceptualize politeness.

Politeness theory find its origins with Brown and Levinson (1987), who build their argument on Goffman’s (1967: 5) notion of *face*, defined as “the positive social value a person claims for [them]self by the line others assume [they] ha[ve] taken during a particular contact”. The public self-image is seen as comprising two needs, i.e. negative face, which limits one’s actions, and positive face, which relates to the desire to be accepted and approved. As Kádár and Haugh (2013: 27) recall, “Brown and Levinson subsequently integrated T/V theory into their framework by associating respectful term of address forms with negative politeness and plain term of address forms with positive politeness”.

As many other languages, German features formal (V, from French *vous*) and informal (T, from French *tu*) pronominal forms to refer to the addressee(s) (see 3.1). Described as “pronouns of power and solidarity” (Brown & Gilman 1960), T/V forms have been seen as indicating either (reciprocal) solidarity and familiarity between speakers, or power and authority, respectively. The

correspondence between a linguistic form and an apparently stable meaning has been criticized as “deterministic” (Kendall 1981), however, and indeed, pronouns do not convey a unique meaning but must always be assessed according to the context. Because the common association with one of the two poles of power and solidarity, T/V forms still are “prime examples of pragmatically salient expressions as their unexpected use in a standard situation may trigger (strong) feelings centred on rights and obligations” (House & Kádár 2020: 3).

Exploring stances on address forms in German then means analyzing “the various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of sociocultural groups” (Watts 2005: xx). Indeed, lay assessments of address forms often are “‘folk’ interpretations of (im)politeness”, which have been theorized as “first-order (im)politeness” (Watts 2003: 4) or “metapragmatic (im)politeness<sub>1</sub>” (Eelen 2001: 32), as opposed to (im)politeness “a concept in a sociolinguistic theory” (Watts 2003: 4), which is then ‘second-order (im)politeness’ or ‘(im)politeness<sub>2</sub>’. By centering the stances users adopt when tweeting about address forms, this paper focuses on first-order (im)politeness. As we will now see, however, the discussion is not restricted to politeness only.

### 2.3. Interpersonal pragmatics

Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1987) has immensely advanced the field, yet as Locher & Watts (2005: 10) argue, it actually deals “only with the mitigation of face-threatening acts” rather than with relationships that can range from “appropriate”, “unmarked” or “politic” to “impolite”. For this reason, the theoretical discussion on politeness has moved to an understanding of politeness as a discursive concept. Broader than politeness theory, interpersonal pragmatics explores “the dynamics of relationships between people and how those relationships are reflected in the language choices that they make” (Locher & Graham 2010: 2). A “discursive, data-driven, bottom-up approach to politeness” is thus one that offers a renewed focus on “politic behavior”, which is not necessarily polite, yet “unmarked” and “socially appropriate”, and may, depending on the occasion, be “strategic” (Locher & Watts 2005: 16).

Regarding address forms in particular, it is important to note that the division between the T-form and the V-form does not equate a ‘polite’ and an ‘impolite’ form. As De Oliveira (2013: 294) puts it, “[t]he need to be able to assess *appropriateness* in address form use has been acknowledged in the address form literature for more than three decades”. It involves two main components: *conventionalized usage*, which corresponds to (perceived) social norms of use, and *negotiated usage*, at the (micro) level of interpersonal relationships (De Oliveira 2013: 295).

Stances on the use of address forms need to be put in relationship with local norms (Hultgren 2019: 119; Kretzenbacher & Schüpbach 2015: 62), and, more specifically, against the background of three “orders of indexicality” (Silverstein 1979): (1) “localised norms”, (2) “community of practice/organisational or other group-based norms,” and (3) societal/cultural norms as shaping the moral order that underpin all evaluations of politeness” (Kádár & Haugh 2013: 95). The first layer (or first-order) corresponds to the individual level, while the second is “semi-institutionalised” and the third

pertains to “supra-local (i.e. societal) conventions”. Although it is not always possible to disentangle each layer in the empirical analysis, they serve as a tool to account for individual preferences, specificities in a given group (for instance, on Twitter), and finally a broader sense of belonging.

As the identity of the users remains often anonymous in online settings, I draw on the second and third layers for the analysis. I define the people engaging with the DB’s tweet as a ‘light community’, i.e. a “focused but diverse occasioned coagulation[] of people” that remain “as diverse as before and after” (Blommaert & Varis 2015: 54). The “societal/cultural norms” (Kádár & Haugh 2013: 95) are informed by German-speaking users, which is why I focus on German address practices more specifically.

### 3. The German pronominal system and T/V use in advertising and on social media

#### 3.1 (When) Can I say *Du* to You?

The present-day German address system is characterized by the use of three forms of address:

- 1) second person singular informal *Du* (sg. T-form) prototypically used to denote a single addressee;
- 2) second person plural informal *Ihr* (pl. T-form) prototypically used to denote a group of addressees who may be addressed as a *Du* individually, but also within mixed groups (Hickey 2003: 409; Kretzenbacher 2010: 15);
- 3) third person plural honorific *Sie* (pl. V-form) prototypically used to denote either a single addressee or a group of addressees in a formal manner.

The “fuzzy boundaries in actual usage” (Bruns & Kranich 2021: 8) or “fuzzy edges” (Kretzenbacher 2011a: 71) have been underlined by several authors, however: the choice of T- or V-pronouns is context-dependent, including specific uses in communities of practice rather than complying with the distinction between social distance and power (Kretzenbacher 2010: 6–7). Apart from “clear situational contexts” which involve “strangers, particularly in official encounters”, “the choice of address pronoun is critical in first encounters between adults” (Kretzenbacher 2011a: 71–72).

Despite the plural V-form (*Sie*) being the default address form between adults who do not know each other, the boundaries between the use of the T-form (*Du*) and the V-form (*Sie*) are constantly evolving, in particular regarding regional and age-specific uses (Kretzenbacher 2011a). Communities in which the use of the T-form is widely accepted (*Duz-Gemeinschaften*) encompass sports clubs, political parties, in particular the communist and socialist ones, smaller religious communities, etc. (Spillner 2014: 177) as well as students, while the use of reciprocal *Sie* remains common at work (Kretzenbacher 2010: 13). As Hickey (2003: 406) notes, “there is a general correlation between age and the use of the formal *Sie*”, and while the use of the T-form *Du* remains unmarked and widely used among teenagers and young adults, “[s]peakers over 30 will nearly always use *Sie* to any new acquaintances when first met on a neutral public occasion, i.e. not privately or in some special social setting such as in a club”. Apart from status, hierarchy, age, and region, a “shared living-reality”

(Kretzenbacher 2010: 11) is an important factor in deciding whether using the T- or the V-form, thus inviting us to consider how address forms are used within a community of practice rather than in general terms. Which behavior is perceived as polite or, rather, appropriate, is thus relative and varies from one community of practice to another (Ehrhardt 2020).

### **3.2 Globalized address forms? Ikea's *Du* and its reception**

The use of a T-form in marketing is often perceived favorably in Scandinavian cultures, as it is linked with egalitarian values (Norrby et al. 2015), Ikea being one of the most well-known international examples of a “T-policy” (Norrby & Hajek 2011). Despite the influence of such international brands fostering T-norms and the overall “decline of overt hierarchies” following the 1968 revolution (Bruns & Kranich 2021: 3), no general trend regarding address forms on social media are discernible in German.

Several empirical studies have indeed showed how international companies adapt to local contexts, and how address practices are being ascribed social meaning. Starbucks writing the customers' first names on cups, for instance, has been described as practical for Finns and French people emphasizing the utility aspects of language, but also as “excessive intimacy” for Finnish commentators and “marketing” for the French ones (Isosävi & Lappalainen 2015: 113). Kretzenbacher's (2005: 10–12) comparison of the German language websites of Ikea in Germany, Switzerland and Austria has challenged the idea of a unified account on address forms in German. The significant differences in the use of the second-person pronouns show that digital appropriateness in German relies on reciprocal address rather than on a specific form (Kretzenbacher 2005: 7). On the basis of translational choices in Ikea catalogues, House and Kádár (2020: 10) have also shown how pervasive cross-cultural pragmatic differences are. Specifically, they report that 5 out of 8 German interviewees perceive the use of the T-form in the Ikea catalogue as inappropriate, foreign and intrusive since not in accordance with marketing conventions typical for the country. Globalization is therefore better understood as a phenomenon both merging and amplifying local patterns, and language change cannot be reduced to globalization only (Sifianou & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2018: 95).

Altogether, using the T-pronoun is connected to the personalization and colloquialization of language in global companies. Taking the fundamental distinction between German T/V-pronouns and their absence in English, Bruns & Kranich (2021) have investigated the influence of democratization, globalization, and a flattening of traditional hierarchies in society, and show that the ongoing informalization is not as advanced in German-speaking societies compared to Anglophone ones (Bruns & Kranich 2021: 7–8, 23). Altogether, in Germany, the “pronominal style of the service sector has traditionally been the V-form” (House & Kádár 2020: 11).



### 3.3 Digitalized address forms? T/V use in social media

Next to global trends leaning towards colloquialization, digitalization further increases the potential sites of contention when it comes to decide when, where, and with whom which address forms may come into play.

In the early days of the Internet, the T-form *Du* was the most widespread convention, especially as Internet users were still a small community fostering a sense of belonging (Kretzenbacher 2011b: 879; cited by Kretzenbacher & Schüpbach 2015: 37). With the explosion of Internet and social media, address patterns have become more diffuse, but the T-form remains “unmarked” between individual users (Kretzenbacher & Schüpbach 2015: 37). The picture complexifies when taking into account customer-client relations, especially in “conservative sectors such as finance, law or upmarket retail” (Kretzenbacher & Schüpbach 2015: 37): the use of the T-form, even online, would be highly unusual. In Kretzenbacher & Schüpbach (2015: 37), the German railway company is cited, among other examples, as one of the websites *not* using the T-form to address customers. A study on two Swiss brands from the food industry (Migros, which is now the largest the now largest retailer in Switzerland, and the Zurich-based vegetarian restaurant Hiltl) has shown that both companies use the T-form to address their customers on Twitter, but use the V-form on their website and on print media (Degen 2015: 62). Degen (2015: 13) argues that conventional norms of standard language varieties tend to dissolve on the Internet orientating at spoken communication.

On the one hand, address patterns in customer relationships heavily depend on the digital platform and its affordances: while German-speaking websites favor the use of the V-form, the same companies use the T-form on their social media channels, especially on Twitter. On the other hand, as early as in the late nineties, Schulze (1999: 80; cited by De Oliveira 2013: 303) noted that local interactional norms “rather than the medium of communication, were responsible for address choice” (De Oliveira 2013: 303–304). For this reason, it appears counterproductive to assume any stable address pattern online without considering the specific communities of practice.

Indeed, websites exhibit other semiotic features than social media, which, more than ever, are “subject to the interpretative flexibility of the particular social groups involved in developing and appropriating the technology” (Schmidt 2006: 3). Specifically, the microblogging platform Twitter differs from other forms of interactive online communication in the ways it redefines “personal publics” (Schmidt 2006). The Twitter affordances foster a writing-based digital space at the crossroads between “stable” relations (in the ways followers and followees interact) and “highly dynamic” patterns, as popular, controversial or viral tweets from public accounts can reach wider audiences that go far beyond the account’s followers (Schmidt 2006: 6). Twitter communication is conducted for or with a spatially dislocated public (Androutsopoulos & Weidenhöffer 2015: 28) building an “*ad hoc* community” (Bruns & Burgess 2012: 804) around a hashtag, or, as is the case here, a controversial post.

For a company active on social media, choosing the appropriate address form when interacting with customers is thus a highly sensitive interactive moment: On the one hand, the V-form is the unmarked, and preferred address form between unknown adults in German. On the other hand, despite being a grey zone, the conventions on social media rule in favor of the T-form. Kretzenbacher & Schüpbach (2015: 37) have shown that a common marketing strategy used by brands is to stick to address forms that reflect the “profile and culture of the company” rather than complying with the “perceived address norms” of a specific communication channel. It is not, however, how the DB proceeded, thus launching, with its controversial announcement, a debate between offline and online worlds.

## 4. Data and methods

### 4.1 Data collection

The corpus of public reactions is based on two types of tweets surrounding the initial announcement of the DB (see (1)): replies, “a response to another Tweet”<sup>2</sup> that appear below the initial tweet of the DB, and quoted tweets, that take upon the initial tweet by adding a comment and shows up in the users’ timeline. Replies can furthermore be divided into two types: main replies, i.e. direct answers to the DB’s initial tweet, and subreplies that are grouped by sub-conversations, for instance when users engage in a side interaction. Figure 1 visualizes the possible reactions’ types to a tweet:

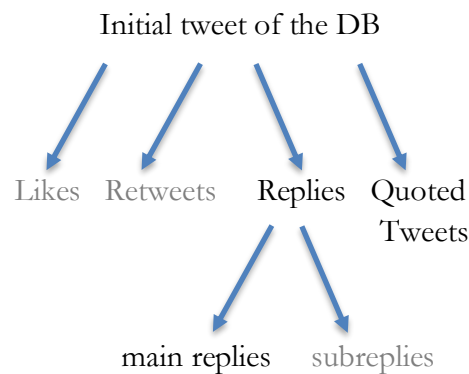


Figure 1: Types of public reactions following a tweet

I have marked in grey the types of public reactions that I did not consider for this study. As they cannot be analyzed content-wise, likes and retweets are not taken into account. Subreplies consist of parallel conversations that may not directly be related to the DB’s initial tweet. I thus decided to exclude them from the data I coded, as the rationale behind the study is not to explore the interactions between the railway company and Twitter users, but to qualitatively analyze the arguments brought into play when favoring or rejecting the use of the T-form. In a first step, I collected all 1233 replies

<sup>2</sup> <https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/twitter-conversations>, accessed on 28.12.2021.

and 143 quoted tweets manually<sup>3</sup> by copy-pasting the tweets replying to or quoting the tweet of the DB<sup>4</sup>. I then focused specifically on the 290 main replies (out of 1233 replies) and 143 quoted tweets for the coding, which I will now present.

## 4.2 Data coding

290 main replies and 143 quoted tweets have been coded according to their stance (pro T-form, pro V-form, unclear/unexpressed) by two research assistants and myself. Apart from two cases of ironical utterances that the research assistants had classified as pro V-form and that I reclassified as pro T-form, the coding of the data was very similar. Unclear or unexpressed stances correspond to reactions that do not target the use of address forms, for instance unrelated comments to green electricity. The extremely high level of inter-annotator agreement shows that almost all tweets can be classified as either pro T-form or pro V-form.

Table 2 presents the distribution of the tweets according to their stance:

	Number of Occurrences	Pro T-form	Pro V-form	Unclear / Unexpressed
Main Replies	290	163 (56%)	109 (38%)	18 (6%)
Quoted Tweets	143	102 (71%)	21 (15%)	20 (14%)
Total	433	265 (61%)	130 (30%)	38 (9%)

*Table 2: Distribution of the tweets according to their stance*

Altogether, there is a clear tendency towards the use of the T-form, which amounts for 265 of the 433 occurrences and thus for about 61% of the tweets and 67% of the expressed positions.

Although taking sociolinguistic variables into account could have been an interesting point of entry into the corpus, relying on Twitter handles to determine categories such as age or gender soon appeared unsatisfactory: Many Twitter handles are gender-neutral; moreover, a name that could read as a ‘female’ name does not automatically mean that the user identifies as a woman. For this reason, the qualitative analysis focuses on the content of the tweets, and does not explore any possible connection between metapragmatic assessments and sociolinguistic variables.

## 5. Data analysis I: The commercial *Sie* of the pro V-form

Data analysis is divided into two sections according to the stance of the user (pro V-form or pro T-form). Section 5 is concerned with tweets against the decision of the Deutsche Bahn. As they announce the generalized use of the T-form on Twitter, the DB positions themselves at the level of

<sup>3</sup> I am thankful to my research assistants Sophia Böhme and Aleksandra Bogusz for their help in preparing the corpus for this study.

<sup>4</sup> Available under this link: [https://twitter.com/db\\_bahn/status/1267728407661555713?s=21](https://twitter.com/db_bahn/status/1267728407661555713?s=21), accessed on 28.12.2021.

*conventionalized usage* (De Oliveira 2013: 295) by aligning with the widespread conventions of familiarity in social networks. For the third of Twitter users pro V-form, this is interpreted as denying them the possibility of *negotiated usage* at the (micro) level of interpersonal relationships. Two argumentative topoi come up: maintaining the customer relationship (5.1) and resisting linguistic and social change (5.2).

### 5.1 Foregrounding the commercial relationship

For a large majority of users pro V-form, the use of the T-form is perceived as contradictory to what is expected from a firm, no matter whether the relationship takes place online or offline. The business relationship prevails over Internet norms, and the offline world remains the background against which appropriateness norms are negotiated:

- (2) Ich halte Du für **unangemessen**. Ich bin Ihr Kunde, Sie sind mein **Dienstleister**.  
I consider you to be **inappropriate**. I am your customer, you are my **service provider**.
- (3) Wir bleiben bitte beim „Sie“, da wir **eine rein geschäftliche Beziehung** unterhalten.  
Please stick to *Sie* as we are maintaining **a purely business relationship**.

All the 109 main replies in favor of the V-form are characterized by an orthography and a punctuation very near to the norm and specifically by the use of end marks to conclude sentences and a very low usage of emojis. Only seven tweets are written without a final point, interrogation, or exclamation mark, and only three tweets use emojis and two others hashtags. The average V-form advocate therefore does not use the full range of digital practices available on social media. As the replies pro T-form display a wide range of features typical for social media (emojis, gifs, expressive punctuation, but also grammatical variants, see Section 6), I can safely conclude that in the corpus, the positioning towards the V-form strongly correlates with a standard use of German, thus showing how conservative metapragmatic values tie in with standard language use as a means of distinction.

For people refusing the T-form, the argumentation is based on *negotiated usage* (De Oliveira 2013: 295). At the core of this understanding of appropriateness norms between unknown adults is the idea that the DB cannot decide (alone) to offer the *Du*, but that the customer is the only one owning this communicative right:

- (4) würde gern **selbst entscheiden**, wem ich das du anbietet!  
I would like to **decide myself** whom I offer the *Du* to.

Implicitly, the customers position themselves as hierarchically superior in the address negotiation. The switch from *Sie* to *Du* thus may only be accepted if the change is introduced by the client:

- (5) Unter erwachsenen Menschen dürfte das nach wie vor eine justiziable Beleidigung sein. In jedem Fall ist es eine Distanz- und Respektlosigkeit gegenüber den Kunden. (**Wenn hier**

jemand das "Du" anbieten kann, dann der jeweilige Kunde, sicher nicht der Dienstleister.)

Among adults, this is still likely to be a justiciable insult. In any case, it fails to show distance and respect towards the customers. (**If anyone can offer the *Du* here, then it is the customer, certainly not the service provider**).

For Twitter users against the T-form, the switch to the T-form is at best perceived as unusual or inappropriate (*unangemessen* in (2)), but more often as disrespectful (*Respektlosigkeit*) because it conveys a false sense of closeness (it lacks distance, *Distanzlosigkeit*). The use of the T-form without the consent of both interlocutors is framed as hypocrisy, as the verb *vorgaukeln* ('pretend') conveys:

- (6) Das „Du“ gegenüber anonymen Größen oder Unbekannten **gaukelt falsche Vertrautheit vor**. Das „Sie“ signalisiert die Ehrlichkeit, dass es diese Vertrautheit gar nicht gibt. Man soll sich lieber **mit Respekt über die bleibende Distanz hinweg** begegnen.

The *Du* addressed anonymous persons or strangers **creates a false impression of familiarity**. The *Du* signals the honesty that this familiarity does not exist. It is better to meet each other **with respect over the remaining distance**.

The distance induced by the reciprocal, unmarked, and default address form *Sie* is not only perceived as relating to usage, but indirectly being ascribed a value of honesty. The first-order indexicality (Silverstein 1979) of “localised norms” (Kádár & Haugh 2013: 95) calls for distance. Disregarding a possible second-order specific to the community of practice, it then evolves towards a third-order of indexicality relating to societal conventions, and ascribes the V-form a meaning of moral order (respect).

## 5.2 Opposing linguistic and social change

The evolution from *distance* to *moral order* also corresponds to the frequent association users pro V-form make between linguistic and social change. A common thread is the opposition to globalization as unwanted, top-down language change. As argued in Sifianou (2013: 91), “the use of informality in public contexts where formality used to be the norm [is] a trend attributed to globalisation”. Whenever Twitter users draw on previous experiences to criticize the switch to *Du*, the international furniture company Ikea (11 out of 290 main replies), the career-oriented social-networking site Xing (1 out of 290 main replies and 6 out of 143 quoted tweets), and the Berliner local transportation network BVG (1 occurrence) are cited:

- (7) Klingt wie **Ikea**. Abwertend. Billigschrott.  
Sounds like **Ikea**. Disparaging. Cheap junk.

- (8) Erst **Xing**, jetzt die Bahn. Warum? Ich möchte selbst noch entscheiden, wann ich von wem geduzt werde. Mag konservativ sein - egal. Von der Bahn möchte ich sicher nicht geduzt werden.

First **Xing**, now the railroad. Why? I still want to decide for myself when I'm addressed by whom. That may be conservative, but it doesn't matter. But I certainly don't want to be called by the railroad.

The tweets denouncing the switch to the T-form as following a more general and negative evolution in a globalized world point to other examples only to show how advanced the pattern towards colloquialization is. In these cases as well, the refusal to be addressed with the T-form is based on the importance of maintaining a commercial relationship. Customers of the DB, even those who are frequent riders, as the hint to the BahnCard50 shows, do not relate to "perceived commonalities" (*gemeinsame Lebenswelt*) (Kretzenbacher, Clyne & Schüpbach 2006: 17) with their service provider:

- (9) Ich will, obwohl BahnCard50-Kunde, NICHT von Ihnen geduzt werden. Ich fühle mich **befremdet** genug nach und wegen des S21-Desasters, gewissen **#Diversity**-Werbekampagnen der letzten Monate und vor allem als Kunde wie Steuerzahler Ausgeplünderter. Also unterstehen Sie sich.

Although I am a BahnCard50 customer, I do NOT want to be addressed by *Du*. I feel **alienated** enough after and because of the S21 [Stuttgart 21, a controversial railway and urban development project] disaster, certain **#diversity** advertising campaigns of recent months and above all plundered as a customer and taxpayer. So don't you dare.

In these infrequent yet aggressive replies, the argumentation line is based on conservative ideologies. The DB's compliance with appropriateness norms on social media is not viewed as the possibility of adapting one's language behavior to the situation (known as linguistic accommodation), but as a form of complacency with diversity statements. Here, the user refers to the LGBTQI\* diversity measures of the DB which culminated in July 2021 in the action "rainbow ICE **#Einziganders**" (rainbow flags on trains)<sup>5</sup>. In the same vein, the switch to the T-form is perceived as language impoverishment ultimately leading to language decay:

- (10) Mir wäre das Sie lieber. Es zeugt einfach von **Respekt**. Leider ist dieser in unserer Gesellschaft nicht mehr hoch angesehen. Auch mit Ende 40 hat man noch die Abstufungen gelernt. **Aber das Duzen ist Teil der Verarmung unserer Sprache.** Sie ist für viele halt zu komplex.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.maenner.media/gesellschaft/community/rainbow-ice-einziganders-deutsche-bahn-ag-diversity/>, accessed on 21 October 2021.

I would prefer the *Sie*. It simply shows **respect**. Unfortunately, this is no longer highly regarded in our society. Even in one's late 40s, one has still learned the nuances. But **the use of the *Du* is part of the impoverishment of our language**. It is just too complex for many.

In attempting to regain control against a linguistic change regarded as unwanted social change towards “diversity” and “simplicity”, refusing the change of pronouns is a way to maintain the status quo and preserve one's power.

## 6. Data analysis II: The Internet *Du* of the pro T-form

The majority of the users are pro T-form (about 61%), which reflects the norms of use on social media in German, especially on Twitter. The users emphasize their understanding of the local context: the T-form is framed as the only possibility (6.1). The perceived superiority of the users in favor of the T-form gives rise to two specific phenomena aiming at distancing themselves from the outgroup: first, performing ‘coolness’, by displaying indifference and irony (6.2), second, polarizing the debate by homogenizing the group of anti-T-form users as typically German (6.3).

### 6.1. Showing one's understanding of the local context

The most frequent argument drawn upon when arguing in favor of the T-form is the idea that it remains the unmarked address form in social media, although some users target Twitter specifically. The division reflects the idea that there are no general norms of use online, even if for some of the participants, the Internet is framed in non-specific terms (Kretzenbacher 2005: 3):

- (11) Im **social media** wird geduzt, die meisten haben eh *nix* anderes verdient und dem Rest *isses* egal.

In **social media**, people are on first name terms, most people don't deserve anything else anyway, and the rest don't care.

- (12) in den **Social Media völlig okay** - würde aber doch wohl ziemlich dumm aus der Wäsche schauen, wenn Schaffner sagt - Du, zeig mir Fahrkarte :)

in the **social media completely okay** - but it would probably look pretty stupid if conductor says – You [sg. T-form], show me ticket :)

- (13) *Imagine* Menschen sind sauer, wenn sie **im Internet** geduzt werden.  
*Imagine* people are pissed off when they get addressed with *Du* **on the Internet**.

To users pro T-forms, T-pronouns of address are not, per se, less polite, but must be assessed in regard to local norms of (perceived) appropriateness. Proponents of the T-form implicitly assess the

T-form as ‘politic behavior’, which is described as “unmarked, socially appropriate behavior” (Locher & Watts 2005: 16): it is ‘completely okay’ (12) (and not, for instance, ‘polite’), to use *Du* in this context.

In these comments, the use of generic sentences is prevalent, in clear opposition to the personal stances and the use of the first person singular (‘I’) in tweets of pro V-form users. The generalization is visible through the use of a passive construction in (11), the absence of any agent in the first part on the tweet in (12), or the generic noun phrase ‘people’ (*Menschen*) in (13). While the use of T-form is unmarked only on social media, the comments show that these norms do not apply to the offline world, as the ironic reduction into ‘You – show me ticket’ (NP *ticket* without any article as to mimic inadequate language use) in (12) shows.

Contrary to the tweets in favor of the V-form, tweets supporting the T-form display a wide range of linguistic features, including variations in punctuation, non-standard spelling (for instance *nix*, for *nichts* in (11)), English words (*imagine* in (13)) although anglicisms are negatively perceived in Germany (Spitzmüller 2005), reductions (*isses* for *ist es* in (11) or *gibts* for *gibt es*). Among the 163 main replies in favor of the T-form, 40 exhibit at least one emojis, which is significantly more than the two isolated tweets with emojis among users pro V-form. We see a correlation between a higher use of nonstandard German features and the positioning in favor of the T-form, thus suggesting that people preferring the T-form also are those who adopt the semiotic resources typical for the “conversational” genre (Zappavigna 2017: 202) of the microblogging platform, including hashtags such as #gernperdu or #gernperdu (#gladlyonafirstnamebasis) (4 occurrences).

Another important difference between tweets pro T-form or V-form is the frequent recourse to metapragmatic comments in tweets in favor of the T-form. Pro T-form users do not simply express personal preferences. Rather, they comment on the reactions to the DB’s announcement, not on the announcement in itself. Twitter users in favor of the T-form thus do not only express their support, but also dismiss their concerns of the users in favor of the use of the V-form by mocking their non-willingness to adjust to the online community.

## 6.2 Performing coolness

A specificity of the comments in favor of the T-form is that people who express their support describe themselves as the only ones mastering appropriateness norms on social media. Because they believe that holding onto the V-form is not only outdated but crucially improper and even risible, Twitter users repeatedly ridicule people who refuse to comply to social media appropriateness norms. I propose to describe this social positioning as ‘performing coolness’, which can be understood as displaying one’s compliance with digital and globalized norms towards colloquialization through language play. Precisely because they master social norms, users pro T-form can play around them.

In order to perform coolness, people in favor of the T-form resort to two opposite strategies to achieve the same communicative goal: mock the outgroup. My second-order analysis of the users’ stancetaking shows that both strategies rely on an overextension of the concept of politeness, either by being expressively overpolite, or by being overly informal. While the first strategy relies on irony



through antithesis and exaggeration, the second one pertains to banter through false colloquiality and imitating a feeling of belonging. Here are examples of ironical politeness relying on an excessive request to preserve the addressee's positive face:

- (14) Ich bin hier auf Twitter **eine Autoritäts- und vor allem Respektsperson**. „Seine **Erlaucht**“ wäre angemessener. Bei @piefke\_96 „**Euer Durchlaucht**“.

Here on Twitter, **I am a person of authority and, above all, respect**. “**His Serene Highness**” would be more appropriate. With @piefke\_96 “**Your Serene Highness**”.

- (15) Bitte ab jetzt auf twitter *nur noch* Siezen  
Please *only* use *Sie* [pl. V-form] on Twitter from now on

- (16) Wie es **Euch** beliebt. Quatsch, ich duze *alles* was es nicht rechtzeitig auf die Bäume schafft.

As **you** like it. Nonsense, I say *Du* to everything that does not make it to the trees in time.

- (17) Sehr geehrte Deutsche Bahn, sehr geehrter Herr Lutz, ich lehne das ab und möchte gerne weiter von Ihnen gesiezt werden. Bitte notieren Sie sich meinen Namen für die korrekte Ansprache! Herzlichen Dank. Mit freundlichen Grüßen, Dr. Malte Dürr

Dear Deutsche Bahn, Dear Mr. Lutz, I refuse this and would like to continue to be addressed by you formally. Please make a note of my last name for the correct form of address! Thank you very much. Yours sincerely, Dr. Malte Dürr

The statements rely on an antithesis, i.e. on a proposition that purposely argues the opposite of what is meant by exaggerating the position of the people against the T-form. We are faced with a typical case of “reversal of interpretation” (Leech 2014: 101), in which a *chiasmic relationship* enables irony to unfold. The exaggeration relies on demanding an address form that would be so formal that it reads as obsequious, for instance by reinstating the historical third-person singular address form *Seine Erlaucht* or the diachronically attested plural second-person address form *Euer Durchlaucht* or *Euch* (Simon 2003), which, however, is no longer in use. The exaggeration is also constructed through overgeneralization insofar as the use of the V-form should be radically (‘only’ (15), ‘everything’ (16)) and immediately (‘from now on’, (15)) implemented top-down, thus denying any reciprocal use of the T-form or any negotiated usage. Because they rely on irony, the tweets of the users in favor of the V-form are sometimes difficult to decode: the reactions to the letter-like tweet in (17), a clear violation of Twitter norms, show that some users interpret the tweet literally.

While pro V-form users unambiguously express their discomfort in being addressed with the T-form, pro T-form users rely on opposite statements or on exaggerations to convey their agreement. For this reason, we do not find any direct metapragmatic assessments such as the T-form being ‘appropriate’ or ‘polite’ in the corpus, and we have to resort to second-order politeness evaluations. When parodying excessively polite ways of interacting with each other, the Twitter users never move to the V-form, but use outdated address forms. These instances may be analyzed as typical examples of “mock politeness”, understood as “a kind of mismatch” (Taylor 2016: 2–3) during which the surface form of the utterance does not reflect the social meaning conveyed by the Twitter user (Culpeper 2011: 17). By being “ostensibly ‘polite’” (Haugh 2015: 4), the tweets do not become actually impolite, but rather a display ludic use of language. While ludic impoliteness is defined as a specific phenomenon usually targeting a public figure online (Vladimirou & House 2018), these instances of “mock politeness” (Taylor 2016: 2–3) pertain to play as a form of social practice, particularly fostered by the aggregation of users critical of the opponents of the T-form.

The opposite, yet interrelated phenomenon pertains to the use of the nominal address form *Bro* as a way to display exaggerated familiarity, thus going even further than the initial suggestion of the DB. As most pro T-form examples, (18) and (19) are characterized by noncapitalization of substantives, subject elisions, reductions (*kannste* in (19)), imitations of the coronalization of /ç/, which yields pronunciations such as ‘isch’ for ‘ich’ in (20) and is a common although nonexclusive feature of multiethnolects such as Kiezdeutsch (Wiese 2009: 785), and finally the use of English words (*cheers* in (18), *bro* or *bros* in the plural as the abbreviation of the English kinship term ‘brother’ in (18) and (19)):

- (18) Na endlich! Habe mich schon gefragt, wie lange ich noch mit euch durch die Lande gondeln muss, bis ihr mir das Du anbietet! *Cheers*, **Bahn-Bros**!

Well finally! Have already wondered how long I have to gondola with you through the country until you offer me the you! *Cheers*, **rail bros**!

- (19) *kannste* machen **bro**  
feel free **bro**


- (20) *Isch möschte* das *nisch*t [standard: *Ich möchte* das *nicht*]  
I would rather not


Users pro T-form do not provide us with any explicit evaluation of the DB’s announcement as unexpected, unmarked, or even polite. Rather, by extrapolating beyond the offer of the DB, either by being excessively polite or by overextending colloquialization, such users perform coolness: Because they are confident in their use of the address form on Twitter, they do not only accept the switch to the T-form, but also play around it.

### 6.3 A typically German debate?

Beyond the idea that they are the only ones mastering appropriate norms in social media, thus allowing for irony and banter, a common reaction against the people in favor of the V-form results in the construction of an ‘Other’ exhibiting ‘Germanness’:

- (21) Glaube das ist **die deutscheste Art**, jemandem das Du anzubieten.  
I believe this is **the most German way** to offer someone the Du.

- (22) Gibt es etwas, das noch **"deutscher"** ist, als eine dreimonatige Testphase des Duzens?  
 Aber hey, egal, ob man sich bei Beschwerden über Unpünktlichkeit duzt oder siezt...

Is there anything **more "German"** than a three-month test phase of using the first name?   
But hey, it doesn't matter whether you're on a first-name basis when complaining about unpunctuality...

Offering to use the T-form by formally announcing it on Twitter is construed as typically German, as the superlative and comparative forms show. Interestingly, those tweets cannot unequivocally be classified as pro T-form, as they can be analyzed as either ‘neutral’ ways to comment on the DB’s move without taking a stance (21), or as uninterested in the debate and indifferent towards the use of address forms because other issues such as punctuality deserve more attention (22).

Overall pro T-form users crucially reject the need for the DB’s announcement and, going further, the group of those who do not agree with them. The outgroup is singled out as being typically German, which usually implies being white, middle-age, and conservative. A core denomination in this context is *Alman*, a borrowing from Turkish, literally ‘German’:

- (23) **Richtige Almanparty** in den Drukos. Hauptsache Günter und Birgit werden nicht geduzt, das wäre ja infam lel

**Real party of Almans** in the replies. The main thing is indeed that Günter and Birgit will not be addressed by *Du*, it would be infamous lel<sup>6</sup>

The Twitter user in (23), who resorts to irony via antithesis, positions themselves in strict opposition to two fictional characters, representing the typical opponents to the T-form, Günter and Birgit. While a Günter indeed reacted strongly against the use of the T-form in the replies, it seems that the example does not point to specific people. Rather, it sketches through the use of first names representative of a generation (mid-forties to mid-sixties), an ethnicity (white Germans), and a political inclination

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<sup>6</sup> *Lel* is an abbreviation which means the same as *lol* (‘laughing out loud’), and is specific to gamers. Gamers use *lel* instead of *lol* in order for it not to be confused with the abbreviation of the game *League of Legends*.

(resistance towards change) an emblematic figure of the people who took offense of the move of the DB. While the semantic and sociolinguistic profile of *Alman* (8 occurrences) remains partly undefined, it is commonly used by people with a migration background to make fun of stereotypical German behaviors (Kolkmann 2018). The use of the proper names *Birgit* and *Günter* thus work as archetypical, as they stand for a generic kind of people (antonomasia), from which the users clearly distance themselves from. Such examples remind us of the circulation, including many parodic reuses of the middle-aged entitled white, conservative US *Karen* (Kosse 2021).

We come closer to the sociolinguistic profile of *Alman* with the following example:

(24)      **40 jährige almans** posten nach einer woche crickets ein schwarzes quadrat  
beschweren sich aber gleich wenn ein kundenservice social media account sie duzen  
möchte

**40 year old almans** post a black square after a week of cricket but immediately  
complain when a customer service social media account calls them by their first name

Almans are typically middle-aged (forty years old), and mark their belonging to a certain social class with typical features such as playing cricket, especially in a vacation rental ('after a week of cricket'). The author of the tweet seems to criticize the wish for distinctiveness, coupled with a certain hypocrisy, in following or even appropriating signs of belonging through the semiotics of black squares, which have been shared across social media in various occasions such as manifesting distance against president elect Donald Trump in 2016, or supporting the Black Lives Matter Movement in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd while in police custody in 2020. This widely shared semiotic and social practice is implicitly described as one way of buying oneself a good conscience without being actively politically involved – and this after treating oneself with a one-week holiday vacation and a fancy hobby. The discrepancy between this type of social media behavior, where *Almans* comply to the norms because they may benefit from the sense of belonging and community that arises from it, becomes particularly visible when those same people refuse to be addressed with the T-form.

What is specifically German, parodied as 'typical for potatoes' (the neologism *kartoffelig* as an adjective occurs in two quoted tweets), another derogatory term to describe Germans, in the impossibility to adjust to global trends:

(25)      Ausländische Unternehmen: Wir dozen  
Menschen: ok whatever  
Deutsches Unternehmen: wir duzen mal zum Test!  
**Almans:** WIE KÖNNEN SIE ES SICH EIGENTLICH WAGEN ICH BITTE JA  
WOHL DARUM ENTSPRECHEND ADDRESSIERT ZU WERDEN UND JA  
DAMIT MEINE ICH AUCH MEINE 60 DOKTORTITEL! UNVERSCH----

Foreign companies: We will be using *Du*  
 People: ok whatever  
 German company: we will be using *Du* as a test!  
**Almans:** HOW DARE YOU, I AM ASKING YOU TO BE ADDRESSED  
 APPROPRIATELY, YES I DO MEAN WITH MY 60 DOCTOR TITLES!  
 OUTRAG----

Taking up the common Twitter practice of displaying a fictive dialog, the tweet thus does not read as a reaction to the DB's post but as a metapragmatic comment on the offended reactions in the replies. The big caps in the *Almans* fictive reaction as well as the lack of any punctuation and the interruption of the last word *unverschämt* (translated as 'outrageous') all symbolize how extreme the non-adjustment to social media norms is according to the Twitter user. A particular feature of 'Germanness' is the use of doctor titles, for instance on credit cards or postal mail (also see 'Dr. Malte Dürr' in (17)). In displaying an *Alman* adamant about being addressed formally, the tweet refers to an impossible amount of doctor titles to ridicule this position. Once again, exaggeration is at the center of any attempt to mock advocates of the V-form.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper offered a study of the metapragmatic evaluations of address forms in the German-speaking Twittersphere. These public acts, further defined as stances (Du Bois 2007: 169), involve explicit positioning towards the switch to the T-form, the social actors performing it (the German railway company) and reacting to it (the other Twitter users), and the values attached to the use of the T-form and its (non) users. Specifically, I asked: Which stances do users adopt when being told that they will be addressed with the T-form by a customer service on social media? Broadly speaking, I have shown that the shift to informal 'you' is well accepted only if restricted to Twitter, while being strongly disfavored and deemed inappropriate if understood against the background of a customer-client's relation.

The arguments of each camp can be summarized as follows: For people in favor of the V-form, the customer relationship in the outside world prevails, and unwanted linguistic and social change should be heavily resisted. For people in favor of the T-form, norms of use on social media are met with either indifference or tranquility, as the use of the T-form is not construed as inherently less polite but solely more appropriate online. These two positions correlate with the use of specific linguistic features, ranging from tweets very close to standard German for pro V-form users, to creative and ludic tweets exploring the full range of linguistic and semiotic features available on social media for pro T-form users. These findings suggest that the willingness to adapt trends towards colloquialization is often reflected in greater variety one's language use.

I have proposed to analyze reactions to the DB's switch to the T-form as metapragmatic comments or public acts. To conclude, it is possible to come back to Du Bois's (2007: 139) aspects of stancetaking. First, which value is being ascribed to the use of the T-form? For opponents of the use

of the T-form, the move to the T-form is constructed as an object of contention. For proponents of the use of the T-form, on the other hand, it is discredited as an object of debate: it should not even be discussed. Second, how do Twitter users position themselves? Social actors represent two camps, and two camps only: On the one hand, a third of the users argues that the use of the V-form allows for the maintenance of a company-customer relationship—the commercial *Sie*. On the other hand, users favor the use T-form if the medium or platform (Twitter, or social media as a whole) plays a central role for them—which can be summarized as the Internet *Du*. Between these two opposing poles, there is basically no room negotiation: reactions can always be traced back to one of the two patterns. Third, how do social actors position themselves in regard to other stancetakers? While pro V-form do not express any opinion on the other stancetakers, users in favor of the T-form, who regard the controversy as unsound anyways, polarize the debate by condemning the stancetakers in favor of the V-form as incompetent or old-fashioned—and not only their stances. Fourth, which “presupposed systems of sociocultural value” are invoked through stancetaking? Untangling the arguments stancetakers resort to ultimately involves examining “judgments of appropriateness” (Caffi 1994: 2461) against the background of broader trends such as colloquialization, globalization, and digitalization.

Which arguments, then, are put forward? We can recall the three “orders of indexicality” (Silverstein 1979) playing a role in the assessment of address forms as developed in Kádár & Haugh’s account of politeness (2013: 95). Localized norms (first layer), which pertain to individuals, are difficult to analyze empirically based on often anonymous digital communication. The analysis has shown, however, that the argumentation of the users pro T-form relies on the implicit idea of community of practice (second layer): The use of the T-form is anchored in globalized norms that promote the use of T-forms as a conventionalized, and thus unmarked and politic, practice on digital platforms and Twitter specifically. Users in favor of the V-form, on the other hand, implicitly draw on societal/cultural norms (third layer): The V-form remains the unmarked address form between adults who do not know each other in Germany, especially in a commercial context.

The reactions to the unilateral decision of the German railway company to use the T-form on Twitter is thus representative of antagonistic and possibly irreconcilable systems of values. How to move forward from this? On 01.09.2020, the social media team of the DB declares that they will keep using the T-form on social media channels, thus confirming the success of their test phase.

- (26) Nach einer 3-monatigen Testphase, steht für uns fest: Wir bleiben beim Du. Auch ihr habt uns das mit überwiegend positiven Reaktionen bestätigt. Selbstverständlich bleibt der respektvolle Umgang miteinander.

After a 3-month test phase, it’s clear to us that we’re sticking with Du. You have also confirmed this with predominantly positive reactions. It goes without saying that we will continue to treat each other with respect.

While the quantitative findings support the statement according to which the DB's suggestion has been met mostly positively, the qualitative analysis of the reactions against the use of the T-form has shown that for users in favor of the V-form, the unilateral switch to *Du* is framed as an infringement of appropriate social distance. Future Twitter debates will show if the T-form durably settles in.

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