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How and why choosing the wrong form of address may make you look like a boomer or a Karen: Characterological figures on social media

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Abstract

In T/V languages, address choice is a highly sensitive communicative choice. As the social media team of the Deutsche Bahn (DB), the German railway company, decided to address their customers with the informal pronoun of address *du* (T form) on Twitter, users reacted heavily, either by welcoming the shift or by harshly opposing it (Truan 2022). The practices analyzed in this paper thus combine two sociolinguistic phenomena that have often been considered rather separately until now: forms of address and characterological figures or stereotypic personae. Specifically, I argue that address forms function as a first-order index, through which a linguistic form (T form or V) indexes the persona of someone compliant to an unmarked, deferent way of addressing others (users of the V), or, on the contrary, of someone adhering to more relaxed Internet communicative norms (users of the T form). When those usages become noticed and metapragmatically linked to one or the other persona, a second-order index is established—which is what happens when Twitter users comment on the reactions following the tweet from the Deutsche Bahn. Finally, when, through a process of enregisterment (Agha 2003; Agha 2005), the V and the T form become objectified, they also become metapragmatically linked to stereotypic personae. As this third-order index becomes visible, using the formal V *Sie* and engaging on a metapragmatic debate on its necessity on social media becomes indexed and re-registered with two interrelated yet distinct personae: the boomer and Karen.

Keywords

address – T/V forms – persona – characterological figure – enregisterment – indexicality – boomer – Karen – social media

1. Introduction

In T/V languages, address choice is a highly sensitive communicative choice. Even when nominal forms of address such as first names can easily be avoided, pronouns remain a topic of contention. The metapragmatic debate around the decision of the social media team of the Deutsche Bahn (DB), the German railway company, to address their customers with the informal pronoun of address *du* (T form) on Twitter (now: X)¹ is illustrative of the tensions between two poles: “contesting the DB’s decision, or endorsing it—but nothing in-between” (Truan 2022: 228).

To understand how such metapragmatic debates arise, let us unpack the two main stances regarding the use of T or V pronouns in German on social media: On the one hand, users in favor of the V foreground the commercial relationship, arguing that the interactions between a company and its customers, unknown adults, takes place in the V in standard German. In this line of reasoning, the hierarchies offline prevail over digital communicative norms. On the other hand, opting for the T form is not merely constructed as a matter of personal preference, but as the only way to display appropriate behavior online. For users pro T form, the move to the T form is indeed regarded as complying with implicit communicative norms on social media (Truan 2022).

People who argue that using the T form is unmarked thus do not merely adhere to what they believe is the widespread communicative norm on social media. Rather, users pro T form also consider that using the T form is an indicator of competence and, conversely, that sticking to the V indexes age (being old) and/or stiffness, thus forming the complex antithetic persona of the unfitted and/or pretentious Internet user—basically the boomer. Both these characteristics (inadequacy due to age and/or unnecessary formality) then merge into Günthers, Jürgens, Norberts, or Birgits, names commonly used in the corpus, who become stereotypical figures of the White, late-middle aged, rigid, old-fashioned stereotypical German and will be called ‘boomer’ or ‘Karen’ depending on the social and linguistic characteristics they exhibit. By contrast, users pro T form build their online persona on appropriateness and thus register-based competence, but also on their ability to navigate complex—because heterogeneous, changing—settings, whereas the users insisting on the V are deemed inappropriate.

¹ Twitter has been rebranded as ‘X’ in June 2023 after Elon Musk became Twitter’s largest shareholder by April 2022 (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/twitter-bird-logo-replacement-x-elon-musk/>, accessed on 20 October 2023). The data, collected in 2020, still was part of Twitter, which is why I will consistently refer to ‘Twitter’ instead of ‘X’ in this paper.

Beyond the phenomenon at stake here, the practices analyzed in this paper combine two sociolinguistic phenomena that have often been considered rather separately until now. It first draws on the pragmatics and sociolinguistics of forms of address, exemplifying empirically that communicative norms always need to be assessed for specific communities of practice. While this claim may not sound particularly original, social meaning-based approaches to the construction of Internet personae (Bogetić 2016; Squires 2010; Ilbury 2022; Heyd 2022) have not shown yet how the ideological link between address forms and typical personae works. In this regard, this paper makes a decisive contribution to both the literature on the metapragmatics of address forms and personae from a sociolinguistic perspective. I propose that address choice and its metapragmatics play a crucial role for the construction of characterological figures. Specifically, I show that through a process of enregisterment (Agha 2003; Agha 2005), address forms become metapragmatically linked to stereotypic personae.

The paper is structured as follows. I first briefly review the literature on address choice in German with a focus on pronouns (I/V forms) and social media. In order to understand how address choice may be linked with certain sociolinguistic personae, it is then necessary to present the concept of *persona* in sociolinguistics. Section 4 focuses on the corpus, showing how tweets following the announcement of the DB to address their customers informally have been selected. The data analysis is handled in Sections 5 and 6. The qualitative analysis focuses on how users pro T form refer to users pro Vs through two main strategies: (1) being on a first-name basis with the detractors, thus actively provoking users resisting the T form; (2) calling the detractors ‘boomers’ or ‘Karen’, thus exhibiting digital competence while shutting down the discussion. Ultimately, I argue that the stereotypic personae of users not mastering digital norms relies on the re-enregisterment (Watts & Morrissey 2019) of the global figures of the boomer and Karen, and how they become locally interpreted in the German context.

2. Address choice in German

Address choice in German relies on the distinction between formal (V, from French *vous*) and informal (T, from French *tu*) pronominal forms to refer to the addressee(s). The opposition between those two sets of forms gives rise to three pronominal forms of address:

- 1) second person singular *du* (sg. T form), which can be seen as the informal form of address to refer to a single individual;
- 2) second person plural *ibr* (pl. T form), which is the informal form used to address a group of addressees that would be addressed as *Du* if they were singled out, but also within mixed groups (Hickey 2003: 409; Kretzenbacher 2010: 15);

- 3) third person plural *Sie* (sg./pl. V), which is the honorific form of address to address either a single person or a group of people formally and has been viewed “at least until the late 1960s” as “the default pronoun of address” (Clyne, Norrby & Warren 2009: 6).

The distinction may be read as an opposition between “power and solidarity” (Brown & Gilman 1960), but several authors have noted the “fuzzy boundaries in actual usage” (Bruns & Kranich 2021: 119) or “fuzzy edges” (Kretzenbacher 2011a: 71). Indeed, while the V *Sie* is considered to be unmarked between two adults who do not know each other, especially in professional contexts, many specific communities such as sports clubs, political parties, in particular the communist and socialist ones, smaller religious communities (Spillner 2014: 177), students (Kretzenbacher 2010: 13), or specific situations such as sharing a drink (Clyne, Norrby & Warren 2009: 6), favor the singular T form *du*.

More specifically, in the online context we are looking at in this paper, it has been shown that address choice is a highly disputed matter. Studies on the early days of the Internet have shown that the T form *du* was usual (Kretzenbacher 2011b: 879; cited by Kretzenbacher & Schüpbach 2015: 37), and still remains “unmarked” between individual users (Kretzenbacher & Schüpbach 2015: 37). On the one hand, Kretzenbacher’s (2005: 10–12) exploration of the German language websites of Ikea in Germany, Switzerland and Austria has shown that what is considered appropriate has more to do with reciprocal address rather than with specific forms. On the other hand, Truan’s (2022) investigation of the metapragmatic stances following the switch to the T form *du* by the German railway company shows that the switch to the T form prompted reactions as different as indignation, indifference, or agreement by Twitter users.

The overall picture is that German-speaking adults who have never met usually employ the plural V *Sie* for a first or work-related encounter, but that speakers may use or be open to the T form *du* on social media. The picture becomes more complex when a brand (here, the German railway company Deutsche Bahn) offers a shift that may seem to align with the conventions of a specific platform (Twitter), while potentially disregarding the fact that, for some users, the customer-client relationship prevails. In those cases, the choice of an address form not only becomes an object of contention, but also a symbol of the persona of the user opting for the V or the T form. To better grasp how address forms may index specific personae, I now turn to the notions of enregisterment, characterological figures, and persona on the Internet.

3. Enregisterment, characterological figures and personae on the Internet

The concept of *enregisterment* was first coined by Agha as (2003: 231) “processes through which a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of

forms”. Drawing on the Bakhtinian concept of *voice* (Bakhtin 1981; Bakhtin 1984), Agha shows that specific ways of speaking (or *utterances*) index typical personae. The idea is that people may use different forms to signal different ways of being according to the context: Patterns that are seen as *contrastive* (differing between people) then index distinct personae (Agha 2005: 38). Different ways of expressing things then become linked with “social types of persons, real or imagined” (Agha 2005: 38). As more and more people use specific linguistic forms while aligning with the personae that stand behind the use of these forms, a form may be seen as representative or typical of certain types of people and then becomes *enregistered* (Agha 2005: 57).

Going further, ‘the Internet language’ has become “differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms” (Agha 2003: 231), and, as Bogetić (2016: 249) underlines, “one that is ideologically linked to specific social personae, in this case youth”. In other words, the ways we speak online tend to be homogenized as one way of speaking (or one register) that would be typical for how young people speak. But as the ways the youth expresses itself is often seen as deviating from the standard or deficient, the Internet language, as it is associated with the youth, also becomes subject to critique per extension.

Through a process of *iconization* (Irvine & Gal 2000: 37), linguistic features that index social groups or activities are perceived as a “social group’s inherent nature or essence”. Then, it is not only the Internet discourse, but also its users, that are “characterized as ‘uncareful,’ ‘sloppy’ or ‘irresponsible’” (Bogetić 2016: 249). While the popular metadiscourse on language and new technologies resorts to ‘classical’ ideological frameworks such as standard ideology (Milroy 2001), concerns about the Internet language use also specifically involve the youth (Thurlow 2006). Interestingly, as I will show, metapragmatic comments about the use of certain address forms on Twitter are not only linked to a supposedly ‘young’ communicative behavior, but also to the default norm online, thus indexing those who do not use the T form as “digital immigrants” (Prensky 2001). The analysis will thus show that people resort to new indexical links when it comes to assess the appropriateness of address forms.

Another line of research focuses on the construction of personae online through a wide range of semiotic means. An example is the ‘Hun’, a British woman who uses variant spellings and specifically feminine discourse features whose taste and multimodal elements index working-class despite her best attempts to travel, show she is enjoying her life, etc. (Ilbury 2022). Another example is *Lisa aus Australien* (‘Lisa from Australia’), a German girl in her early twenties who has spent time abroad and comments on her English language skills without noticing how her language proficiency ties up with tropes of social mobility and privilege (Heyd 2022). Both personae exemplify how using specific linguistic forms becomes associated with stereotypical

figures, and which crucial role names can play in the process, as they enable the (real or imagined) persona to become embodied and personified.

Similar processes are at work when users pro T refer to detractors as ‘boomers’ or ‘Karen’, as will be shown in this paper, yet little has been shown on the relationship between address forms and personae in social media yet. This is especially true when it comes to linking address forms to the *indexical order*, although precisely the T/V distinction was mentioned in Silverstein’s (2003) liminal work. One of Silverstein’s arguments is that no single instance of T or V can index by itself a relationship of power or solidarity, as Brown & Gilman (1960) postulated. This kind of interpretation, which can be paraphrased as “the V is polite” or “the T form is rude”, resorts to a layperson’s understanding of how linguistic forms work (Silverstein 2003: 208). For Silverstein (2003: 206), however, “[r]educing the problem to the psychological decision of a single individual to say ‘T’ or ‘V’ is, as we can see, already a highly ideologically positioned view of the matter”. Thus, a first-order of indexicality equating the T form with solidarity and, conversely, the V with power, offers only a very partial and inconclusive explanation of “whatever is going on here” (Silverstein 2003: 206). Rather, he pursues, we must look at how users metapragmatically imbue T/V forms with social meaning, thus moving from the first-order index to the second-order index that looks at how forms become noticed and commented on.

In this paper, I argue that address forms function as a first-order index, through which a linguistic form (T form or V) indexes the persona of someone compliant to an unmarked, deferent way of addressing others (users of the V), or, on the contrary, of someone adhering to more relaxed Internet communicative norms (users of the T form). When those usages become noticed and metapragmatically linked to one or the other persona, a second-order index is established—which is what happens when Twitter users comment on the reactions following the tweet from Deutsche Bahn. Finally, when, through a process of enregisterment, the V and the T form become objectified, they also become metapragmatically linked to stereotypic personae. As this third-order index becomes visible, the use of the V on social media becomes linked with boomers. This paper thus focuses on how Twitter users, and specifically those in favor of the T form, metapragmatically take up the comments of the users pro V. In doing so, users pro T establish a third-order index that links the use of the V with the persona of the stereotypical boomer, while implicitly portraying the users of the T form as the ideal (because competent) Internet user.

4. Data collection

In June 2020, the German's railway company Deutsche Bahn announced on Twitter that they would use the T pronoun *du* for a three-month test phase. The public reactions were of two kinds: replies, which appear below the initial tweet of the DB and are visible by everyone scrolling down below the DB's tweet, and quoted tweets, that add a comment and show 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. As they cannot be analyzed content-wise, likes and retweets are not taken into account.

There were 290 main replies, 943 subreplies, and 143 quoted tweets. The 290 main replies and 143 quoted tweets had previously been coded according to their stance (pro T form, pro V, unclear/unexpressed) by two research assistants and myself (Truan 2022). I was able to show that the metapragmatic comments are in favor of the T form in 61% of the cases and 67% of the expressed positions. In this study, particular attention is paid to the reactions of users pro T form, in particular when they respond to users pro V who are scandalized by the DB's decision. The responses to particular users mostly come in form of subreplies, which had not been coded previously. For this paper, I am concentrating on the interactions between Twitter users rather on their exchange with the social media team of the Deutsche Bahn. I am conducting a qualitative analysis of selected tweets. Indeed, the tweets are sarcastic or context-dependent (replying to a specific user), and coding needed to rely on too many subcategories to be conclusive. For instance, when replying to a user called Birgit, users may call her *Birgit*, *birgit* (with small caps), *birgie*, etc. Each pattern then amounts to only a few occurrences, which is quantitatively not particularly insightful. Instead, by looking at tweets as part of a longer thread (a sequence of tweets following one another), we come to a better understanding of how, for instance, 77 users react to Philip (also: *Fipsi*, *Bro*, *Boomer*), a journalist and author with a big Twitter account (39.4 followers as of October 2023) employing discourse strategies similar to one another (see (1) and following examples).

I have identified two main discursive strategies that users pro T form put forward to ridicule their opponents: (1) sarcastically fostering a friendly rapport with those who oppose the T form by using their first name or any variation of it without their consent; (2) referring to these detractors as 'boomers' or 'Karen' to assert digital proficiency while showing the impossibility to conduct a fruitful discussion. I now delve into the two strategies in sections 5 and 6, respectively.

5. Playing the competent language user, or how to provoke people resisting the informal *you*

The first strategy can be summed up as ‘be on a first-name basis’ with users who expressly requested *not* to be called by their first name. Here, users pro-T reverse the expectations of users who demand to be addressed with the V by forcing the use of their first name upon them. A typical example is the chain of reactions after the following tweety by a user named Philip:

- (1) Wie wäre es, wenn die Bahn sich darauf konzentriert, dass
- die Züge pünktlich fahren,
- die Züge sauber sind,
- die Preise halbwegs reell sind, statt die Kunden peinlicherweise zu duzen?
Wir sind nicht per Du.

How about the railroad focusing on ensuring that

- the trains run on time,

- the trains are clean,

- the fares are halfway decent, instead of embarrassing the customers by being on a first-name basis?

We are not on a first-name basis.

Philip here addresses several consensual and recurring points of concern regarding the German railway company, which, however, conflate the offline and online worlds. The initial tweet of the Deutsche Bahn indeed did not aim at enforcing a generalized use of the T pronoun *Du* in trains, but solely on Twitter. Yet Philip moves the discussion to general concerns that go beyond address use on social media. Philip’s tweet is also characteristic of the tendency of users pro V to conform to a standard use of orthography and punctuation in the corpus. Consider how in (1), despite the enumeration in form of a list with bullets, Philip introduces commas at the end of each line. By contrast, users pro T form employ linguistic features deemed typical for online communication:

- (2) Heul heul schluchz schluchz
sob sob

- (3) dU bIsT jA kOmIsCH
yOu aRe weird

Example (2) exhibits a typical German form: two inflectives (or, as Freywald (2015: 908) notes, “uninflected verbs [which] actually [are] bare verb stems without the otherwise obligatory infinitive suffix *-en*”) combined with reduplication to imitate boomer tears sarcastically and thus characterize their emotional reaction as illegitimate.² Also called *Erikatins*, inflectives became

² Freywald (2015: 936) argues that reduplication of uninflected verbs can be interpreted as durative while not involving intensification. It is difficult, based on a single example, to see whether it applies here, but my impression is

popular in colloquial German by Erika Fuchs' translations of Disney comics (Mickey Mouse) since the 1950s (Schlobinski 2001: 194), i.e. targeting the then pre-adolescent and adolescent boomer generation. Although inflectional constructions should not be seen as instantiations of an 'Internet language' that, in fact, does not exist (Dürscheid 2004), they still seem to be used as a means to linguistically mark the mastering of digital norms. As they adjust their digital writing to their recipient(s) (a more general phenomenon also known as accommodation Bell 1991), young people use more expressive elements such as emojis or inflectives with close friends, while communication in family chats tends to be more restrained (Grotlüschen & Dutz 2023). In the same vein, the subreply 'yOu aRe weird' in (3) does not only comment on the reactions of users pro V content-wise but adds a stylistic twist to it through the use of alternating caps. While alternating caps often are used as sarcastic devices³, the utterance in (8) should be interpreted literally. The sarcastic dimension does not apply to the propositional content of the utterance 'you are weird', but to the whole situation which deserves, according to users pro-T, to be (dis)regarded with contempt.

Also consider the following reactions to Philip's tweet:

- (4) **Philip**, locker bleiben! Ich weiß, Akademiker im fortschreitenden Alter gehören häufig zu der Gruppe Menschen, für die das Inet immernoch #Neuland ist, aber in soz. Netzwerken zu Siezen gilt im allgemeinen eher als Bruch mit der Etikette. LG 🙄 P.S. den Kritiken stimme ich zu!
Philip, take it easy! I know, academics advancing in age often belong to the group of people for whom the Inet [Internet] is still #NewTerritory, but addressing with Sie [V] in soc. networks is generally considered rather a break with etiquette. Cheers 🙄 P.S. I agree with the criticisms!
- (5) Mein Gott, **Fipsi**, nimm doch endlich mal den Stock aus dem Arsch.
For God's sake, Fipsi, take that stick out of your ass for once.
- (6) **Diggah** das ist Twitter und keine verfickte Bewerbung.
Diggah this is Twitter and not a fucking job application.
- (7) a. Ok boomer
 b. Ok Karen

Here again, the user pro T form in (4) demonstrates digital competence through a wide range of linguistic features: abbreviations (*Inet* for 'Internet' or *soz.* for 'sozial', *LG* for 'Liebe Grüße', translated as 'Cheers'), hashtags (#Neuland), and emojis. The examples moreover showcase four

that intensification is also present in this case, as the idea is that boomers are making a big fuss out of something completely normal and unmarked on social media. It may thus be argued that the (reduplicated) sobbing is both continuous *and* intense—thus triggering this parodic imitation.

³ See for instance how the user-generated Urban Dictionary explains the phrase: "The texting way of being sarcastic." (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=alTeRNaTiNg%20CaPs>, accessed on 8 November 2023).

ways of addressing the users pro-V: (1) using the person’s real name based on their Twitter handle or profile (*Philip*); (2) using a diminutive, colloquial form of that first name (*Fipsi*); (3) using a very informal, generic form of address such as *Diggab* or *Bro*; (4) variations around *Ok boomer* which index a certain generation (old-ish) and stiffness (“take it easy!”, “take that stick out of your ass for once”). Whether *boomer* and *Karen* actually are (fictive) forms of address in (7) may be debated, as we may argue that these utterances work as prefabricated units of speech where the vocatives become imbued with a larger meaning related to the pattern *ok + boomer/Karen* (often without punctuation mark at the end) (see next section).

What holds true for the forms of address, however, is that they all undermine the straightforward request “We are not on a first-name basis” by jokingly twisting the user’s desired V-reciprocity. Because Twitter interactions do not happen only between both interlocutors, however, but in front of an “imagined audience” (Marwick & boyd 2011) of known mutuals and unknown people, we may see these tweets as directed at the other users as well in order to perform ‘digital nativeness’ and a witty spirit for anyone following the exchange. The ironic use of *Diggab* or *Bro* as in (6) is even more salient in this subreply, which combines the rejected form of address with a formal one and a heart as a sign of closeness:

- (8) **Ach bro oder eher gesagt Herr Werwolf**, wenn **du** Probleme an der Arbeit und Co. hast, stehe ich **dir** immer für ein Gespräch zur Verfügung <3
Oh bro, or rather Mr. Werewolf, if you [T] have problems at work and the like, I’m always available for a chat <3

Interestingly enough, Wulf or Mr. Werwolf belongs to the very few users who received much attention, together with Philip or Birgit, who are both big accounts on Twitter (39.6K and 73.1K followers, respectively, as of November 2023). Philip alone gets 77 subreplies pertaining to the same genre as (4)-(7), thus showing that the point is not so much to answer to Philip, but to demonstrate how inadequate him sticking to the V is on social media. Most reactions revolve around very few users who become the targets of a small-scale shitstorm—thus the concentration on very few first names such as Günther or Birgit, who match real Twitter profiles. Shitstorms, also known as online firestorms, have been defined as “the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative word-of-mouth and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks” (Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley 2014: 118). Although the parodic or ironic comments analyzed here do not pertain to online aggression, they do create, as a repeated measure by several single users targeting the same person, a community of practice against the individual person being scrutinized.

In conclusion, the presented examples illustrate four distinct strategies employed to address Twitter users exhibiting a pro-V inclination, involving the use of real names, diminutive

forms, informal addresses, and variations around phrases like *Ok boomer*, which we will now turn to. These strategies, while ostensibly humorous, collectively subvert the straightforward request for a formal address, thus highlighting the inadequacy of adhering to the V on social media. These observations shed light on the complex dynamics of online discourse and the ways in which humor and linguistic choices are leveraged to navigate social media interactions while—inadvertently as it seems—piling up the key features of the stereotypic persona of the boomer. We will now consider what exactly being a boomer online entails.

6. “Ok, Boomer” and “Ok, Karen”: The V as an index for old-fashioned and entitled language users

Illuminating for our study is how the user’s metapragmatic assessment of forms of address becomes attributed to a characterological figure with socio-economic characteristics that do *not* match the reality. In the friendly yet ironical message in (4), Philip is indirectly portrayed as the boomer—combining a generational gap making him unaware of social media norms with an academic background.

As he is deemed to be of one those “academics advancing in age”, Philip combines two main characteristics: belonging to a certain social class (having an academic background, i.e. having a university education) and belonging to an older generation. While the stiffness of academics may be a German cliché (see the discussion around doctor titles in Truan 2022: 236), the age typically hints to the boomer, the post-WWII generation born between 1946 and 1964. However, Philip is not a real boomer. As the big accounts concentrating most subreplies are the ones of public figures, it is quite easy to retrace their birth year: Philip, journalist and author, was born in 1979, and Birgit, author as well, in 1975. So, maybe unsurprisingly, none of them are *actually* boomers. We may hypothesize that the users calling them boomers mistakenly thought they were older, but this is in fact a relatively implausible explanation. Rather, we see how *boomer* functions as an identity label ascribed by others.

Scheff (1999) suggests that explicit labels are attached to acts that are seen as norm violations, such as terms like ‘drunk’ or ‘drug addict’. This also applies to implicit or unnamed norms known as residual norms, which are not designated with specific labels. I propose that the answer *ok boomer* is an attempt at labelling the person using the ‘wrong’ norms on social media by insisting on transposing address behavior from their offline practices. Described as “the symbol

of a generational war” (Lim & Lemanski 2020: 1), it has become a way to cut people off in conversation through the ironic sense of agreement *ok* seems to convey⁴.

In the heated debate on T/V forms of address, the boomer label does not, or not only, activate the representation of an old-ish person. More so, the idea is that this person does not master the unwritten social norms on the Internet, with age being a possible explanation factor: “Digital immigrants” (Prensky 2001), who may correspond to the “Semi Internet People” (McCulloch 2019), who were typically “older, in the workplace, and with an established social life” when the Internet entered their lives, grew up with no contact to social media, thus (still) do not know how things go ‘over there’. The characterological figure of the boomer is imbued with a sense of inadequacy and inappropriateness more than with an age-related variable. Because they refuse to adjust to social media norms promoting the use of the T form, Philip and Birgit, despite their actual date of birth, become symbols of inappropriateness. By labeling the boomer and not the language use *per se*, social media users demonstrate the importance of forms of address in displaying social competence.

Next to the now phraseological unit *ok boomer*, Karen is also present in the data. Similar to the boomers, users would not call themselves Karen—it is an “attributed identity” (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2022: 16) that is not enregistered prior to interaction. This means that the traits typical for the figure of Karen become salient as the Twitter conversational thread unfolds. The figures of the boomer and the one of Karen, respectively, point out to interrelated personae, but they do not fully overlap. Despite the limited number of tweets, the data shows a clear gender divide: Users with male names such as Philip, Günther and Malte are being called boomers, while Birgit is being referred to as Karen. This matches previous findings, as Karen is used as a label for women in 84% of the analyzed incidents in Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2022: 27). Karen is “stereotypically middle-aged and white” (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2022: 14). Thus, in the general perception, she is younger than *boomers*, and a perceived ethnicity comes into the picture as well. Crucial for both figures, however, is a “sense of entitlement” (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2022: 16) that becomes obvious only once the person performing the condemned reaction is publicly being labeled Karen.

Interestingly, one of the most salient features of Karen, her “perceived racism” (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2022: 27), is irrelevant for the dispute about T/V forms in German. Similarly, Karen as “the type of person to go over someone’s head and resolve conflict by invoking some

⁴ See again the Urban Dictionary: “When a baby boomer says some dumb shit and you can’t even begin to explain why he’s wrong because that would be deconstructing decades of misinformation and ignorance so you just brush it off and say okay.” (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Ok%20boomer>, accessed on 8 November 2023).

higher authority e.g. store managers or the police” (Kosse 2021: 7) plays no role in the German indexical field (Eckert 2008) around forms of address either: There is no “higher authority” users pro-V could appeal to. Moreover, as users pro V argue, the negotiation of forms of address is situated and specific to the interaction: It cannot indistinctly be applied to all participants. What then, constitutes the core of Karen’s persona, the one that becomes re-enacted in the German context?

The (real) Birgit users react to is well-known for her traditional, anti-feminist, and transphobic positions. While her political positioning may explain or contribute to conservative language ideologies, racism does not play a role in her unwillingness to transition to more informal forms of address with a customer service on social media. The formula *ok Karen* here works as a case of “re-enregisterment”, “in which a register begins to generate new and possibly very different social stereotypes” (Watts & Morrissey 2019: 278). By conflating the personae of the boomer and Karen, we reduce them to their smallest common denominator: inadequacy and entitlement. The trope of digital gap due to the inadaptation of the boomer generation is relegated into the background, while the summative value of *ok* gets reinstated in a new context. In both cases, the comment marks the final reaction and aims at shutting off the discussion, while pretending to agree. Not quite coincidentally, the ironical dimension of *ok* also contributes to the anti-figure of the boomer and Karen: the opposite types—those who know how to behave and use T forms on Twitter—are funny, subtle, relaxed.

Altogether, the personae of the boomer and Karen have lost their central characteristics in the German discourse: They neither refer to old persons, nor to racist ones, either fictively or in reality. Rather, the formulaic expression *ok* + first name or person-referring noun works as a reference to digital culture to reinforce the trope of users pro T forms being digitally competent. In turn, the digital competence of opponents to Philip, Birgit, and similar users, is threefold: 1) They use the ‘right’ form of address; 2) They use linguistic forms common on social media; 3) They point to tropes of digital culture known internationally, while allowing for their re-enregisterment in the German local context.

7. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the use of a specific address form on social media has become enregistered. Specifically, this study concentrated on the metapragmatic appropriation by Twitter users, particularly those advocating for the T form, of comments made by proponents of the V. In this process, proponents of the T form establish a third-order index that connects the usage of the V with the persona of the stereotypical boomer, implicitly presenting users of the T form

as the epitome of Internet proficiency due to their competence. Twitter users pro V are constructed as inadequate, entitled, and conservative social media users. Digital competency is linguistically marked with a T form despite nonreciprocity. Precisely because users pro V explicitly express their discomfort in being called on a first-name basis, they get reactions purposely violating what they express being comfortable with. Social media users get ascribed 'boomer features' between the lines, as (self-described) competent users display linguistic features typical for the digital world.

Ultimately, as the V and T form undergo enregisterment, a process that results in the objectification of the users pro T or V, they concurrently acquire metapragmatic associations with stereotypical personae. The manifestation of this third-order index becomes evident when the utilization of the V on social media platforms becomes associated with individuals categorized as boomers. With explicit metapragmatic assessments such as *ok boomer* or *ok Karen*, the embodiment of characterological figures goes a step further. Through re-enregisterment, typical characteristics of boomers or Karen such as age and race are downplayed while others become foregrounded. Using the V then becomes metapragmatically associated with the sense of entitlement and inadequacy—the common denominator reuniting users pro V regardless of their generation, gender, and ethnicity.

The role played by forms of address and their metapragmatic evaluation in enacting stereotypical personae is crucial. Here, we see clearly that using a form of address deemed inappropriate has far-reaching consequences: The users resisting change are mocked publicly, consistently, and become the embodied representation of well-known fictive characterological figures. The conflation of the personae of the boomers and Karen is particularly illuminating of how digital tropes become re-instantiated for a local, particular debate. Altogether, the metapragmatic debate on the use of T/V forms in German is an excellent symbol of how apparently global norms prevailing on social media as well as widely shared cultural references find their way in specific communities of practice through a local twist.

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