

My summer vacation: Speaking German (wait, what?)

 devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20191122-01

November 22, 2019



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It was during our family summer vacation to England and France that I spoke German out of necessity, rather than doing so just for fun.

And I wasn't even in Germany.

We were traveling on the Paris Métro, and the two people opposite us were speaking to each other in their own language. One was sitting and the other was standing, so they were effectively shouting to one another because the train was so noisy. Hardly a private conversation.

My wife (not a German speaker) asked me if it was German they were speaking, and I confirmed.

This got the attention of one of the Germans, and I broke the awkwardness by engaging in some small talk.

“Where are you from?”

“How long will you be here?”

“You should come visit Germany next time!”

My algorithm for deciding whether to use *Sie* (formal second person) or *du* (informal second person) is simple.

If it is not a social situation, then I use *Sie*. Examples: Buying tickets, asking for directions.

If it is a social situation, then avoid using the pronoun as long as possible, employing circumlocution to defer the inevitable. “Is there an X?” versus “Do you have an X?” for example.

Eventually, the other person will choose a pronoun, and then I go along with it. Fortunately, in this case, the man on the train chose one before I was forced to. He went for *Sie*.

This contrasted with my experience in the United States, where German speakers seem to be more likely to use *du* in social situations, even with people they are meeting for the first time. Maybe spending so many years in the United States caused them to recalibrate their formal/informal meters.

Bonus chatter: English, German, and Swedish each went in a different direction with respect to formal and informal address. We start with this:

Language	Informal singular	Informal plural	Formal
German	du	ihr	<u>ihr</u>
Swedish	du	ni	ni
English	thou	you	you

All three languages agreed that formal address is accomplished by using the informal plural.

By the 20th century, formal address in Sweden shifted to addressing the person by their title or name, depending on the situation. The use of *ni* was considered rude because using it implied that the person you're talking to wasn't important enough to merit being addressed by title or name.

Today, we have this:

Language	Informal singular	Informal plural	Formal
German	du	ihr	Sie
Swedish	du	ni	du
English	you	you	you

German switched to using the third person plural pronoun (capitalized) for formal address.

English abandoned the informal address and shifted to using the formal *you* for everybody. Informal address is still used for backward compatibility (e.g., in prayers) or to create an old-fashioned atmosphere.

Swedish underwent Du reform in the 1960s, wherein the complex system of address was replaced by just using *du* for everybody.

I discussed the topic some time ago, to which I defer.

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