A sociolinguistic investigation into the use of oom and tannie as forms of address between Afrikaans people in South Africa

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Introduction

Although studies on forms of address towards adults in the Afrikaans language context has been done in the past [1], there remains a gap in research concerning the use of oom and tannie (uncle and aunt) between Afrikaans speakers.

The use of specific forms of address – or lack thereof – is subject to certain variables, which usually indicates something about the addressee, the speaker, the formality of the situation, as well as the type of social interaction between them. Variables such as age, race (a sensitive topic in South Africa), and social background are considered in this study in order to make a 21st century contribution to existing research on forms of address.

In South Africa, Afrikaans speakers generally use oom and tannie to refer to actual family members. Despite its general usage, many people find it unacceptable, irritating and even unprofessional to make use of this form of address, or to be addressed in this way.

Even though it forms part of the Germanic language family, Afrikaans differs from Dutch and German non-family members. Despite its general usage, many people find it unacceptable, irritating and even unprofessional to make use of this form of address, or to be addressed in this way.

Results and Discussion

Bloomfontein and George are fairly similar in terms of race, gender, socio economic status, income and education [4]. Therefore, the participants in the study coming from these respective cities were treated as a single group for the purposes of this poster.

The results are presented by specifically focusing on the race and age of participants. Social and political aspects influence the way in which one speaks, and age relative to generational changes can also reflect social and political change. [5] The relation between age-based patterns of variation and speakers’ experience of seminal historical events are relevant for the South African context, e.g. the political oppression of colour and black people during the Apartheid years. The previously oppressed currently stand on a more equal footing with regards to the ways in which members of different races are referred to, as well as the subsequent use of forms of address. These discursive variables can also be transferred to the next generation.

Pictorial representation of the current study

Hypotheses of the current study

General questions include the following:

- Do younger people (<30) use oom and tannie more than older people?
- What age difference between the speaker and the addressee represents the accepted norm for oom and tannie to be used as a form of address?
- Is the use of oom and tannie polite, i.e. is it used as a sign of respect?
- Do Afrikaans speakers experience the use of oom and tannie as positive or negative?
- Do older people (>60) experience this form of address as negative?
- What age difference between the speaker and the addressee represents the accepted norm for oom and tannie to be used as a form of address?
- What is the relationship between the speaker and the addressee?
- How do family members from different racial backgrounds refer to one another?
- How do different generations refer to one another?
- How does the use of oom and tannie differ between generations?

Methodology

This investigative study presents empirical research as the results of a mixed methods approach to data collection. To gather the quantitative data, an (electronic) questionnaire was utilized to determine the current norm. (Semip-)structured interviews, systematic observation and (social) media (e.g. Facebook) were used to gather qualitative data. For children aged 4-6 years, pictures depicting generic South African situations were used whereas the questionnaires used for children aged 12-15 years, were both shorter than those used for adults and included simpler language.

An example of two questions for adults:

**I USE OOM AND TANNIE: SELECT ALL APPLICABLE**

- o Because I was taught to do so
- o When I do not know how to address someone
- o Because the use of formal forms of address is uncomfortable
- o When it feels right in the situation
- o When someone is 20+ years older than me
- o To show respect

**CASHIERS OF THE SAME RACE, IN A BANK:**

- o Auntie or uncle (oom or tannie)
- o First name
- o Avoid form of address

For children aged 4-6 years, another approach was taken. They were shown pictures and were asked to tell the researcher who the people are and what they are doing. Examples of pictures shown to members of this age group, depicting everyday life in South Africa:

**Results and Discussion**

The provisional hypothesis is that oom and tannie are the preferred and most frequently used forms of address used by younger white and coloured Afrikaans people. The sample of black participants was too small to make comparable conclusions with regards to the forms of address examined in this study. It seems that these forms of address are (still) taught at home and both whites and coloureds, aged 12-50, use it to show respect towards others. On completion this study will make a new and important contribution regarding research on forms of address, especially in the South African context. The data obtained furthermore represents a historical survey which can be used in future to determine if (and how) norms with regards to forms of address have changed.

**Conclusion**

The use of specific forms of address – or lack thereof – is subject to certain variables, which usually indicates something about the addressee, the speaker, the formality of the situation, as well as the type of social interaction between them. Variables such as age, race (a sensitive topic in South Africa), and social background are considered in this study in order to make a 21st century contribution to existing research on forms of address.

**References**


Picture 1. Two homeless men begging shows the reality of the current economic climate.

Picture 2. A white woman and man in a grocery store, being addressed by a coloured cashier.

**References**


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