

For employees in Germany and France, English and its chummy familiarity are unsettling, says Brunswick's **CARL HOENTHAL**

# To "Du" or Not to "Du"

**E**NGLISH IS NOW THE WORLD'S DE FACTO business language. Non-Anglophone companies must walk a tightrope between English and their native tongue, a balancing act that is changing the way people interact. English blurs the old-fashioned line between formal and familiar, throwing down the constant challenge: How should one address colleagues?

In English, the pronoun "you" works the same for everyone and calling someone by their first name is more often acceptable. This is confusing for the Germans and French, where the formal "Sie" and "vous" establish clear boundaries and necessitate the use of the person's last name.

Professional relationships may evolve toward the familiar, but that takes time and a measure of earned trust. Leaping to address someone as "du" (in German) or "tu" (in French) without an invitation can be taken as a gesture of disrespect. Americans and other English speakers blind to the distinction risk seeming rude or comical.

Meanwhile, the true nature of relationships between colleagues in UK and US companies is elusive for continental Europeans. It all sounds refreshingly casual. Everyone is so nice to one another. Status doesn't seem to be a factor.

Across Europe, old formalities are disappearing. The younger generation likes to keep it informal, of course. The older generation is loath to be seen as a spoilsport or out of touch. Klaus Gehrig, the head of the Schwarz Group – parent company of major retailer Lidl – sought to clarify the matter for his workforce two years ago. "There is no compulsion," he said. "But one thing is clear: Those who do not use 'du' are isolating themselves. These are not the people we need." (As irony would have it, Lidl recently raised eyebrows when it was caught monitoring employees with cameras.)

Gehrig is no outlier; many German companies have embraced the informal. Bosses want to be addressed by their first names. Johann Jungwirth, Chief Digital Officer at Volkswagen, decreed, "My name is J.J. I don't need to be addressed with [the formal] Sie." Informal is the new normal at Continental, Allianz, the Otto Group and others

eager to be in tune with the zeitgeist. We can poke fun at all this. But in countries like Germany and France, casual language (along with Silicon Valley-style leisure wear) nourishes a dangerous misconception. It suggests a proximity to superiors, colleagues and customers that reality does not bear out. A company is neither a family nor a circle of friends and even flat hierarchies are still hierarchies.

Asymmetrical relationships can get unpleasant without some professional distance, as when a sensitive issue has to be sorted out between a superior and subordinate. It can be harder to resolve a conflict between familiars who address each other with the informal "du." At the same time, use of the formal "Sie" does not preclude a meaningful relationship.

In the end, Germany is Germany and order is the order of the day. The renowned Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach asked Germans how they felt about liberal use of "du." Two out of three people said they extend "the 'du' offer" ["das 'du'-Angebot"] only to close friends. A third of the responses said they address peers at work with "Sie."

Yet ambivalence runs deep: In a study by the Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung, two out of three respondents were reluctant to address their bosses with "Sie" – yet dislike being addressed with "du."

Casual talk and a laid-back look may create a false sense of security. Bosses will always be bosses. If they see the need to cut a few thousand jobs, dismissing those people with the familiar "du" is not going to ease any pain.

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## WHEREFORE ART "THOU"?

**BETWEEN 400 and 600 A.D., northern Germanic tribes settled in England; their language planted the seeds of modern-day English. From it, English inherited two second-person pronouns: a plural, "you," and a singular, "thou." As in German, the plural came to be used to show respect for elders and those of senior station, while the singular was**

**used with children, peers and inferiors. The 17th century saw rapid social mobility; people found it simpler to use "you" with everyone and "thou" fell by the wayside (except as an insult).**

**Today, ironically, the informal "thou" is preserved mostly in Christian religious rituals as a sign of respect for the Almighty. Credit for that goes to the adoption**

**of language from the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, published in 1611. The original Hebrew and Greek didn't have a formal/informal distinction, so in the KJV translation, "you" is simply the plural form, and "thou," singular. Thus, the 23rd Psalm addresses God, saying, "thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."**