

From “du” to “Sie”: A Bourgeois Social Reformer’s Views on Workplace Relations (1880–1910)

Abstract

The hierarchical relations between unskilled and skilled workers on the one hand, and their workplace superiors on the other, were also reinforced by a linguistic convention of the German language: the distinction between the familiar [*du*] and the formal [*Sie*] form of address. Although they originally used “du,” which carried with it a connotation of condescension, superiors resorted to various gradations of formality before eventually addressing workers with the formal (and more respectful) “Sie.”

Source

Having just escaped from university, I learned as a young factory trainee that those in charge addressed the workers with the familiar “du” [you], while weak-minded semi-potentates managed with “man” [one], “er” [he], and “Ihr” [the plural form of you], or some mumbled compromise. Still others excelled at avoiding any direct form of address by using elaborate formulations. The “Ihr” persisted for a long time until the formal “Sie” surfaced bashfully on its way to eventual triumph. I distinctly remember the occasion upon which “Sie” first passed my lips with smoothness and clarity. And when workers were allowed or forced to appear in the factory owner’s office, they remained standing at the door at an appropriate distance. Later on, they were permitted to step closer, but no seating was available. Indeed, to preempt any expression of politeness or any other type of incident, a special tactfulness called for all unused chairs to be removed before the audience was granted. But, in the long run, increased furnishings were unavoidable: chairs were followed by a table, at first a separate one for the workers, and then a common one, at which the proprietor, surrounded by his top people, opened meetings with the workers with: “Dear gentlemen!” In this brief moment of familiarity and others like it, we glimpsed a colorful reflection of the kind of life awakening in the outside world in the widening rush of social reform.

Source: Karl Bittmann, “Nationalgefühl und Arbeiterschaft” (1911), in *Ausgewählte kleinere Schriften*. Jena, 1920, pp. 60–66; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, pp. 112–13.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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