

## Re: Labov's latest discovery in sociolinguistics

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- *From:* "Paul J Kriha" <[paul.nospam.kriha@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:paul.nospam.kriha@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)>
  - *Date:* Sun, 30 Mar 2008 18:01:24 +1200
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"Trond Engen" <[trondnet@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:trondnet@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)> wrote in message  
[news:47ecd56e\\$0\\$23850\\$8404b019@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:news:47ecd56e$0$23850$8404b019@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)

Nikolaj skreiv:

Trond Engen pravi:

1. The royal we: Heads of political entities use 'we' to underline that they speak on behalf of the collective.

[...]

Are these forms present in some other currently spoken or in some earlier Slavic language?

I don't know. Isn't this a European medieval thing?

I don't know.

Slovenian is the only language I've heard of that keep a distinction between the superpolite 3p plural and the polite 2p plural.

Do you mean before my post?

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No. Now. I didn't know before. I generally don't know anything before.

As I said I wondered sometimes about it's origin, and I thought it might be some old form like the dual. I learned German for four years in secondary school, so I understand the German polite form, but I was never consciously aware that it is in fact the third person plural. Or at least, if I was aware while learning, I soon forgot it, and thought of it as equivalent of Slovene vikanje (2p plural). :(

It is, of course, more or less a functional equivalent.

If Yiddish uses 2p plural for the polite form and German 3p plural then maybe some earlier Germanic language used both, just like Slovenian?

Yes, that was my idea, or, at least, that some subset of German made the distinction.

I suspect that the various formal grammatical forms have been relatively late inventions and borrowings. AFAIK, they did not exist in Western Slavic languages as late as in early 1400s. I recall reading a fictitious conversation written by a linguist writer. The conversation was between a 20th century Prague man and a 15th century Hussite warrior also from Prague. The author made a special point in showing that the 15th century Hussite did not understand the formal forms of the modern language. Every time he heard the plural pronouns and plural verbs he looked over his shoulder to see who else was in the room.

I have checked the Slovene online virtual library about onikanje: it has two articles, one in 'Slovenski jezik = Slovene linguistic studies ISSN: 1408–2616', and it seems it is in English:

AVTOR..... : Reindl, Donald F. – avtor  
NASLOV..... : Slovene ultra–formal address: borrowing, innovation, and analysis  
V PUBLIKACIJI..... : Slovenski jezik. – ISSN 1408–2616. – 6 (2007), str. [151]–168.  
OSTALI NASLOVI..... : Onikanje v slovena ini: prevzem, inovacija in analiza  
PREDMETNE OZNAKE..... : slovena ina // onikanje // Slovene language // formal address

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and one in a local newspaper.

I will make a copy and report back.

Here I coin 'superpolite' and then you find someone who's been using 'ultra-formal'. I bet someone will beat me even to my own funeral.

German seems to have lost  
the 2p plural, but I I see that  
both  
Yiddish and Dutch have it.  
Could the distinction be  
alive in some  
dialects, say Austrian?

But nowadays this superpolite form is more  
thought of in terms of  
submission and it is not used anymore by  
majority (actually even  
the polite form is receding).

Sure. My point was that since the polite plural is a cultural  
trait,  
shared by most European languages, it has spread with  
culture.

Accordingly, one might suspect relics of its most developed  
form to  
be found in neighbouring languages, where one might expect  
it to  
have spread out from the center of culture and politics. Thus,  
I'd  
not be surprised if the Slovene polite forms were derived  
from the  
elevated language of the court of Vienna some centuries  
back, and  
perhaps still alive also in some Austrian dialects. But I don't  
\_know\_.

The formal second and third person plural have also been borrowed  
into Western Slavic languages. The various dialects make slightly different  
uses of them. I guess it's relatively easy to borrow a formal grammatical  
form even from completely different language subfamily. It must be easier  
than borrowing other language feature. There are no problems with

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clashes between new forms and already existing grammatical features. It often means that the already existing forms are used almost unchanged as they are.

However, unlike Slovene, Czech never elevated the third person formal quite as high as what Nikolaj says has done Slovene.

Between 1600s and early 1900s when Vienna was truly our empire capital, the most of the townfolks lived in bilingual environment.

However, the third person plural remained being treated as 'foreign'.

It was typically used by street merchants and ordinary shopkeepers to address their customers. In literature and films it was frequently used to parody German speakers or parody uneducated Czech speakers trying to sound educated and posh.

After 1918 disintegration of Austrian empire the third person plural started to disappear from the Czech town dialects. It has hardly ever made it into rural areas. After the WW2 it was heard only in old films and parodies.

Do you think it spread across Europe from one point of origin, somewhere in Austria?

Well. The superpo... ultra-formal is not that widespread. We (you and I) know of it in Slovenian only.

Onikani (3rd ppl) seems to exist or have existed in other Slavic languages of the old Austrian empire, not just Slovenian.

Now and then one can also hear 'mykani' (1st ppl).

For a list of languages with T-V distinction see:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T-V\\_distinction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T-V_distinction)

There's a formal 3p plural in German, (subsequently) Danish and (subsubsequently) Norwegian, but not in Yiddish and Dutch, that might be essentially the same thing (but replacing the older formal 2p plural rather than developing into a split of formal levels like in Slovenian). This distribution suggests that it's a fairly recent innovation originating in the High German area. And perhaps that its center was somewhere close to Slovenia. How many German speaking centers of international influence in polite manners do you find around there?

But this is all purely speculative. We'll see what Donald Reindl has to say.

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I don't know much about Austrian dialects from the  
grammatical/linguistic point of view.

Neither do I.

This has little to do with English usage. Follow-up to sci.lang only.

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Trond Engen

– hunting High and Low German

Tally ho!

pjk

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