

# Second-person pronoun use and address strategies in on-line personal ads from Quebec

Rémi A. van Compernelle\*

*The Pennsylvania State University, Department of French and Francophone Studies, University Park, PA 16802, USA*

Received 25 April 2007; received in revised form 2 November 2007; accepted 19 April 2008

---

## Abstract

The development of various forms of computer-mediated communication has enabled many aspects of social life to occur in on-line environments, including finding and maintaining romantic relationships. Recent research on Internet dating sites has investigated motivations for joining such networks, discursive features of on-line personals, and other social aspects of Internet romance, yet there exists a noticeable lack of sociolinguistic analysis. This study analyzes the use of second-person pronouns in French-language on-line personal ads from Quebec. Two main strategies were found: singular address with *tu* or *vous* singular and plural address with *vous*. While a general preference for singular address—usually *tu*—was observed, young men tended to use plural *vous* fairly often. Also analyzed are the various ways in which *tu* and *vous* can be used in on-line personals in utterances such as greetings, descriptions of the desired other, and invitations to contact. This article also includes a discussion of on-line identities and relationships with regard to second-person pronoun use and provides a number of directions for future research.

© 2008 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Personal pronouns; Second-person pronouns; Computer-mediated communication; French; On-line dating; On-line relationships

---

## 1. Introduction

The development of various forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has enabled many aspects of social life to occur in electronic environments, including finding, developing, and maintaining friendships and romantic relationships (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Ellison et al., 2006; Hardey, 2004; Hollander, 2004; Sahib et al., 2006; Whitty and Carr, 2006; Yurchisin et al., 2005).

---

\* Correspondence address: Department of French and Francophone Studies, The Pennsylvania State University, 211 Burrowes Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA.

*E-mail address:* [compernelle@gmail.com](mailto:compernelle@gmail.com).

Despite fears that the increasing popularity of on-line social interaction is contributing to “the decline of community, the growth of social isolation . . . and the tension between the demands of professional work and those of emotionally gratifying intimate relationships” (Hollander, 2004:69), much of the literature on CMC offers a more optimistic view of personally enriching virtual communities (Hardey, 2004; Hearn et al., 1996; Henwood et al., 2000; Whittle, 1997) that strengthen and enhance those that exist in off-line contexts (Mosco, 2004:31).

Among other types of virtual communities, on-line dating networks have emerged as popular venues for singles of all ages (Hardey, 2004), especially for those who seek an alternative to more traditional meeting places, such as bars, clubs, work, and so forth (Whitty and Carr, 2006:125). Many people who decide to explore the world of on-line dating do so following “some event that [has] occurred off-line, such as a move to a new town or the dissolution of a previous relationship” (Yurchisin et al., 2005:740). Although there is a widespread belief that dating networks, as well as other types of on-line communities, are filled with sexual deviants and married persons engaged in cyberadultery (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004:199–222), it appears that most members of such networks value truthfulness since dishonesty could lead to personal embarrassment if an on-line relationship progressed to an off-line environment (Ellison et al., 2006; Hardey, 2004; Yurchisin et al., 2005). Further, “many individuals find cyberspace to be a safe space to relate and to self-disclose sensitive aspects about themselves” (Whitty and Carr, 2006:127). One reason for this greater sense of security may be that dating networks allow members to terminate communication with an undesirable partner more easily than would be possible in face-to-face, off-line contexts.

Mediated courtship provides users with a means to end any interaction by the simple strategy of not responding to an e-mail. . . . Indeed, users are able to close exchanges with little loss of face and with little damage to their social self. (Hardey, 2004:214)

In addition, on-line dating networks may offer a greater degree of protection from the risk of personal embarrassment and the awkwardness that is often associated with off-line dating contexts (Hardey, 2004; Yurchisin et al., 2005). Hardey (2004:208) noted that the ability to self-select potential partners based on set criteria may “increase the opportunities for developing emotionally gratifying relationships and reduce the risk of meeting ‘undesirables’” (see also Yurchisin et al., 2005).

Although the technology that enables on-line dating networks to exist is modern, the notion of finding and developing romance through written language is very old (Gudelunas, 2005; Hardey, 2004; Hollander, 2004). Yet, unlike traditional modes of written correspondence, geographical and time constraints appear to be less influential in modern on-line environments since messages can be sent and received rapidly, which may help foster emotions and romance more quickly than ever before.

On-line relationships are based upon an improved version of an old-fashioned way of communicating: writing. In the new version, the time gap between writing, sending, receiving, and reading has been made almost instantaneous—the sender can receive a reply while still in the state of emotions in which [he or she] sent the original message. This difference, which may appear merely technical, is of great emotional significance, as emotions are brief and involve the urge to act immediately. (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004:7)

Although on-line personal advertisements are essentially modern versions of print personals, they are less restrictive since advertisers may write as little or as much as they wish without the constraints of space and the monetary cost associated with the printed press; therefore, on-line dating networks may offer greater freedom in constructing biographical narratives and

descriptions of the desired other (Hardey, 2004; Yurchisin et al., 2005). In addition, on-line dating networks enable members to contact each other immediately, usually through the network-based electronic mail system and synchronous chat messages.

Recent research (Groom and Pennebaker, 2005; Gudelunas, 2005; Hardey, 2004; Smith and Stillman, 2002; Yurchisin et al., 2005) has suggested that members of on-line dating networks often establish a set of norms for social behaviors and practices for their community, yet there exists a noticeable absence of socio-linguistic and -pragmatic analysis in the literature. Previous studies of on-line dating networks have concentrated on motivations for using dating services, discursive differences between genders or men and women of different sexual orientations, and the construction and re-construction of one's social identity in on-line and off-line dating contexts. The present study aims to link the social, technological, and linguistic aspects of on-line dating networks through an analysis of second-person pronoun use in Internet personals. More specifically, this article compares singular and plural second-person address systems as they occur in 200 personals posted by heterosexual men and women from Quebec.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. In section 2, the relevant literature on second-person pronoun use in French is reviewed and research questions are introduced. Data collection and the methodology for the coding of data are described in section 3. Section 4 includes a discussion of the results and a limited number of descriptive statistics are presented. In addition, the ways in which on-line dating network members use T and V in their ads are analyzed and examples are provided. In concluding, the results are discussed in the broader context of on-line communities and relationships, and several directions for future research are advanced.

## 2. Literature review and research questions

Although the second-person address system of French includes only two grammatical forms, the rules that govern *tu* and *vous* use are rather complex. *Tu* is generally considered to be the default singular second-person pronoun: it designates one interlocutor. *Vous*, on the other hand, has the dual roles of both the plural form of *tu* (i.e., *tu* + a 3rd person, or *tu* + *tu*) and the formal, or polite, singular second-person pronoun (i.e., *vous* = polite or formal *tu*). Many social and cultural factors have shaped the second-person address system in French, and it continues to change and evolve along with social and cultural values, adding to the complexity of the *tu/vous* system. As Williams and van Compernelle (2007:806) commented: “There are no steadfast, immutable laws of usage or strict patterns of use. . . [because] variations exist due primarily to differences across time, place, social class, families, and individuals” (see also Grevisse and Goose, 1993:963; for an overview of pronoun paradigms in French, see Peeters, 2006).

While *tu* (T) and the more formal, singular *vous* (Vsg) have referential values (i.e., they designate the addressee), they also “‘index,’ or point to, particular aspects of the social context in which this act of reference occurs” (Morford, 1997:6). Traditional and historical models discuss pronominal address (in French and other languages) in terms of power and solidarity (e.g., Brown and Gilman, 1960), yet this binary semantic approach has been widely criticized as being too narrow (Ardehali, 1990; Martiny, 1996; Morford, 1997; Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990; Wales, 1983). Most current research has reformulated the T/V paradigm in order to account for a number of macrosociological, cultural, and pragmatic factors, such as the evolution of more democratic societies in which the importance of class distinction and social distance has become diminished.

Recent research (Morford, 1997, 2001) has shown that speakers of French are keenly aware of the social, relational, and contextual constraints of the T/V system; however, the formulation of prescriptive rules governing T/V use appears to be impossible. While most speakers of French

agree that T shows intimacy and familiarity, many report using V with people they know well, but to whom they wish to show respect, especially in professional settings. As Morford (1997:16) noted, “*tu* and *vous* point to the nature of the relationship between speaker and addressee, revealing the extent to which each party is entitled to signs of deference and/or of intimacy from the other.” Morford (1997:26–27) added in a later passage that “it is not individual intentions that make [T and V] meaningful, but the interpretability of specific uses according to broadly shared notions about the way language functions and is used within [the] speech community.”

An increased presence of T has been documented on a general level in both France (Morford, 1997, 2001) and Quebec (Tétu de Labsade, 2001:116; Vincent, 2001). Thibault (1991:88) noted that speakers recorded in the mid-80s in Montréal used *vous* less frequently with their interviewer than those who had been interviewed in 1971. Vincent (2001) also reported widespread T use in Quebec society. In recognition of the need for its (French-speaking) citizens working abroad to understand expected behavior and practices in other parts of the (francophone) world, the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade has even created an on-line resource in the form of the *Centre d'apprentissage interculturel* (‘Center of Intercultural Learning’), with *aperçus culturels* (‘cultural overviews’) that explain how to address colleagues and superiors at work. Each part of the *Au travail* (‘At work’) section explains not only language, but also manners, dress, and other customs from both Canadian and non-Canadian perspectives. The comments and advice regarding T/V use in these *aperçus culturels* provide a comprehensive panorama of general tendencies and patterns in francophone countries around the world, even if they are limited to the context of employee–employee and employee–employer relationships and interactions.

While some speakers of French find that the decline of V is a sign of loss of respect in modern society, others believe that the widespread use of T is indicative of evolving social values since social distance and class distinctions are less important now than they were in the past (Morford, 1997, 2001). The use of T has also been observed on micro-levels in written advertisements (Pires, 2004) and in printed interviews in surfing magazines (Claudel, 2004). In each of these cases, reciprocal T use was linked to the shared interest in a particular hobby, which appeared to allow for rather informal and familiar language styles between interviewers and their guests.

Little is known, however, about T/V systems in electronic communication environments. Indeed, Williams and van Compernelle (2007), who analyzed a new system and distribution of T and V in French-language on-line chat communities, are the only researchers to have undertaken such a study. Williams and van Compernelle (2007) reported an overwhelming preference for T at the expense of V in public on-line chat communities. Their analysis revealed that a mere 3 tokens of non-ludic *vous* singular<sup>1</sup> were used and, in all three cases, reciprocal T was established in the subsequent exchanges. All other instances of V were used for plural address (i.e., addressing two or more specified chat participants or the entire room). In a second analysis, the authors themselves participated in a number of chat discussions, addressing people whom they did not know with V. The reactions of chat participants indicated that the use of T has become so widespread in chat communities that the presence of V is often perceived as strange or sociopragmatically inappropriate.

The present study aims to explore the use of the second-person pronouns T and V in the context of an on-line dating network. On-line personals represent an environment that is

<sup>1</sup> Williams and van Compernelle (2007) reported that *vous*-singular was often used in jest, such as during role-plays or imitations of television commercials.

relatively complex for second-person address, especially given the public one-to-many form of discourse they represent.<sup>2</sup> Members of on-line dating networks have the choice of addressing separately each individual who reads their personals (i.e., with T or Vsg) or every other member of the network who might read the ad (i.e., with plural *vous* (Vpl)). There may be, however, an underlying intention of one-to-one communication, which would entail the use of T or singular V. Therefore, three strategies of second-person address seem plausible:

- T is used to address an individual reader. It establishes a sense of familiarity and/or intimacy even though the advertiser and reader do not know each other well or at all. T is most likely expected in any subsequent private, one-to-one communication;
- Vsg is used in opposition to T in order to mark distance, formality, or respect since the advertiser and the reader do not know each other well or at all. Although Vsg is present in the personal, it may not be necessarily expected in the subsequent private, one-to-one communication since it may have been used for fear of being too familiar in public communication, which may risk offending certain readers;
- *vous* equals *tu* + X (Vpl). While the individual reader is implicated in the address, he or she is only one of several or many potential interlocutors. The advertiser gives no indication of what he or she expects to be called in return; therefore, choosing T or Vsg is the responsibility of the reader who will initiate private, one-to-one communication.

Additionally, on-line dating network members may avoid the use of second-person pronouns, perhaps in order to avoid linguistic ambiguity or social repercussions (Gardner-Chloros, 1991). Therefore, the first research question to be explored in the present study is: How often do on-line dating network members address their reader(s) with a second-person pronoun? Given the one-to-many form of communication represented by on-line personals, and the possibility to address either one or many interlocutors, a second question to be explored is: To what extent do network members use singular second-person address (i.e., T or Vsg) relative to plural address (i.e., Vpl)? Finally, a third question to be addressed is: Among those network members who use a singular form of address, which pronoun (i.e., T or Vsg) is preferred?

### 3. Data collection and coding

The data analyzed in the present study were collected from the on-line dating network *Netclub.com* during late fall 2006. Although the network hosts personals from over 4,000,000 men and women from many European countries and North America, only those ads posted by heterosexual men and women residing in the province of Quebec, Canada were considered. Personals that were discovered to be posted by members not native to Quebec were omitted from the data. The data were analyzed within a sociolinguistic framework, giving priority to gender (i.e., men vs. women) and age group (i.e., 18–25 years vs. 36–45 years). In total, 200 personals, equally distributed between the four demographic groups, were considered.

Following data collection, the personals were reviewed and each token (i.e., occurrence) of a second-person pronoun was identified.<sup>3</sup> A preliminary analysis revealed an uneven distribution of second-person pronouns in the personals. While some ads included several examples of

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of computer-mediated discourse classifications, see Herring (2007).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the second-person subject pronouns *tu* and *vous*, all related forms (e.g., imperatives, object pronouns, disjunctive pronouns, and so forth) were identified and coded.

second-person pronoun use, others included only one. Therefore, in order to avoid skewing the data based on individual contribution, each personal was simply coded according to the type of second-person pronoun present (i.e., T, V, or *no second-person pronoun*), irrespective of the number of tokens present in the ad. Those ads in which a V form was present were analyzed further in order to determine whether *vous*-singular (Vsg) or *vous*-plural (Vpl) was used. In addition, a number of ads included more than one type of second-person pronoun, usually Vpl and T. Such examples were coded as *switch*.

In order to understand in which contexts on-line dating network members used second-person pronouns, each occurrence of T or V was reviewed and analyzed according to utterance type. Three categories were established: (1) greeting; (2) description of the desired other; (3) invitation to contact.

#### 4. Analysis of the data

##### 4.1. Overall distribution of second-person pronouns

Each of the 200 personals was carefully reviewed and analyzed, and all words were counted. Although members are allowed a personal narrative of up to 2000 characters (i.e., approximately 300 words), the ads considered in this study averaged only 117 words in length. No noticeable difference was observed between the demographic groups.

The presence of a second-person pronoun or related form was then analyzed. In total, at least one occurrence of a T or V was included in approximately three quarters of all personals. The overall distribution of second-person pronouns is provided in Table 1.

The data indicate that most members (74.5%) of the *Netclub.com* community prefer to address their potential reader(s) directly with a form of T or V. This finding suggests that those who post on-line personals recognize the interactive side of Internet dating sites. Although the personal is itself a form of one-to-many communication since any number of people may be able to find and to read the ad without being personally addressed, this interaction—and the eventual progression to private one-to-one communication through e-mail, chat, or telephone conversation—takes place between real, definite people. In other words, the use of T and V demonstrates some awareness of a definite other (i.e., the reader), while those ads that include no tokens of second-person address remain rather vague, especially when only indefinite third-person references are made (e.g., *je cherche un homme/une femme qui...*).

While the direct address of a definite, albeit unknown, other appears to be very common among members of on-line dating networks, the data indicate two distinct, competing systems or

Table 1  
Overall distribution of second-person pronouns

2nd person pronoun	Men (18–25) <i>n</i> (%)	Women (18–25) <i>n</i> (%)	Men (36–45) <i>n</i> (%)	Women (36–45) <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i> (%)
T	10 (20)	17 (34)	21 (42)	21 (42)	69 (34.5)
Vsg	3 (6)	5 (10)	2 (4)	6 (12)	16 (8)
Vpl	24 (48)	12 (24)	8 (16)	6 (12)	50 (25)
Switch	3 (6)	3 (6)	2 (4)	4 (8)	12 (6)
Total 2nd person	40 (80)	37 (74)	33 (66)	39 (78)	149 (74.5)
Ø 2nd person	10 (20)	13 (26)	17 (34)	11 (22)	51 (25.5)
Total	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	200 (100)

strategies: singular address (i.e., T/Vsg) and plural address (i.e., Vpl). The use of Vpl is not necessarily surprising in the on-line context, given the one-to-many participation structure of this communication environment; yet the data show an overall preference for a singular address among those members who used a second-person pronoun. Excluding personals counted in the *switch* category, T/Vsg was present in 62.95% of the ads in which a second-person pronoun was used (T/Vsg = 85; Vpl = 50). Despite the general preference for T/Vsg, differences were observed between the various demographic groups. While men and women in the 36–45-year-old age bracket produced a mere 14 tokens of Vpl (28% combined), the personals of young men account for nearly one-half of all examples of Vpl use (24 tokens). Further, 18–25-year-old men are the sole demographic group to show a preference for Vpl over T/Vsg (Vpl = 64.86%; T/Vsg = 35.14%).

The personals counted in the *switch* category included examples of both singular and plural addresses. In all 12 cases, a Vpl form was used in some kind of general statement, truism, or greeting, while a T form was used in more definite addresses, such as the description of the desired other or an invitation to contact. An example of one such personal is provided in (1), an ad posted by a woman in the 36–45-year-old age group. Second-person pronouns and related forms have been underlined for emphasis. In the following excerpts of data, the term *sic* has not been used to indicate that a typographical, punctuation, orthographic, or grammatical error has been merely reproduced. An English translation is provided below each example in italic type.

(1) Bonjour les gars. . .

Belle affaire!!! Faur faire une annonce pour se vendre ou pour accrocher votre regard... Je vais faire ça bien simple. Si tu es de ceux qui ont du respect, de l'humour, de l'honnêteté t'es bien parti alors continue à lire...LOL<sup>4</sup>

*Hello guys....*

*What a thing!!! Gotta post a personal to sell oneself or to get your<sub>[Vpl]</sub> attention... I'm going to make it simple. If you<sub>[T]</sub> are one of those who has respect, a sense of humor, and honesty you're<sub>[T]</sub> off to a good start so keep<sub>[T-imperative]</sub> reading. . .LOL*

In (1), the possessive determiner *votre* obviously refers to any and all potential readers of the ad since this particular woman begins her personal with the greeting *Bonjour les gars*. It is also a clear illustration of the switch from indefinite to definite reference. In the first line, this woman states a general truth, indicated by the use of *il faut* ('it is necessary') and the use of the third-person indefinite reflexive pronoun in the infinitival form *se vendre* ('to sell oneself'), which presumably refers to the advertiser herself and to all other women who have to post a personal in order to attract the attention of men at the same time. The use of Vpl, therefore, makes reference to all men, not necessarily the reader of the ad, although he is undoubtedly implicated on some level since the advertiser has stated this general truth or observation in her ad. The switch to a definite, singular second-person pronoun personalizes the narrative. In other words, the advertiser has anticipated a direct exchange with a definite, albeit unknown, other and has therefore designated the unknown person as T.

The use of T was preferred among those members who used a singular second-person pronoun (T = 81.18%; Vsg = 18.82%). Although a preference for T is not necessarily surprising in the

<sup>4</sup> The English abbreviation *lol* ('laughing out loud') is frequently used in French electronic discourse. The French equivalent *mdr* ('mort de rire' = 'laughing to death') is also commonly used.

Quebec context, where T is often used among people who do not know each other well or at all (Téту de Labsade, 2001:116), the relatively low frequency of Vsg suggests, at least, that advertisers treat on-line dating networks as an extension of their off-line selves. In other words, T is used in this context as would also be expected in non-electronic environments. Further, Pires (2004:54) argues that T use in public writing, such as product advertisements, indicates a direct, simple, and therefore truthful address, whereas the use of Vsg might be seen as overly respectful or flattering. The same appears to be true in on-line personals, especially given the sense of a shared objective among members (e.g., finding a date, a partner, or marriage), which would naturally lead to a more informal or familiar style of discourse. T may, therefore, be used to convey equality and/or solidarity within the community, while Vsg is avoided since its presence may add unnecessary formality or social distance between members. In the remainder of the analysis of the corpus, a number of excerpts of data will be provided in order to illustrate the different ways in which T and V are used in this type of electronic communication.

#### 4.2. Second-person pronoun use in greetings

A number of the personals analyzed in this study included some sort of greeting or salutation, such as *bonjour* or *salut*. Although the majority of greetings made reference either to a plural indefinite third-person, as in excerpt (2), or to no one at all (e.g., a simple *bonjour*), some members chose to include T or V, as in (3) and (4).

- (2) Salut les filles  
*Hey girls*
- (3) allo a toi qui regarde ma fiche.  
*hello to you<sub>[T]</sub> who is looking at my profile.*
- (4) Bonjour à vous tous  
*Hello to you<sub>[Vpl]</sub> all*

In total, 14 members included a second-person pronoun in a greeting (a mere 15.38% of all greetings). While examples of indefinite third-person plural address in greetings were much more numerous, T/Vsg was preferred to Vpl among those who used a second-person pronoun (T/Vsg = 71.43%; Vpl = 29.57%). However, it is important to note that no examples of second-person pronouns in greetings were found in the personals of men aged 18–25 years; rather, indefinite third-person addresses were present in the vast majority young men's greetings, which provides further evidence of a preference among young men for a plural address to an indefinite number of readers over a singular address to a definite other as discussed in section 4.1.

A cross-tab analysis of members who included a greeting revealed that, in addition to the 14 members who used T or Vsg in the greeting, 25 members used T or Vsg in another part of the ad. Although these 25 members did not include T or Vsg in their greetings (e.g., *salut*), the presence of T or Vsg in the ad leaves little doubt as to the singular nature of the address (i.e., *salut* is addressed to an individual reader as opposed to a group).

#### 4.3. Second-person pronoun use in descriptions of the desired other

Although much of the personal is centered around self-promotion (i.e., description of self), descriptions of the desired other (i.e., the person the advertiser would like to meet) are often present, most notably in men's personals. No fewer than 59 ads (29.5%) considered in the present



study included a description of the desired other. The young woman in excerpt (5) provides a typical example of such a description.

- (5) Je sais que je suis une très bonne personne qui a de bonnes valeurs jespère de tout coeur rencontrer mon idéal qui a un grand coeur, charmant, attentionné, qui est rendu au même niveau que moi dans sa vie, c'est-à-dire qui n'est pas dans ses trips de sortir dans les club et les bars à toute les fin de semaines. Qui recherche LA femme qui le complera.

*I know that I'm a very good person who has good values I hope with all my heart to meet my ideal who has a big heart, is charming, attentive, who has gotten to the same level as me, that is who isn't going out to clubs and bars every weekend. Who is looking for THE woman he'll fall for.*

Descriptions of the desired other such as (5) are very common. While they provide a description of member's dream man or woman, they make reference to an indefinite third person. Even when T or V is present in another part of the personal—as was the case for (5)—the use of the third-person in the description of the desired other tends to defocus the referent (i.e., the man or woman of the advertiser's dreams). The use of T/V in another part of the personal invites the reader—who is potentially the desired other—to measure him- or herself against the description of this hypothetical person. In addition, examples in which T was used to refer to a second-person other than the reader were also found, as in (6).

- (6) Daniel Boon, où es-tu? Il ne manque que toi à mon bonheur.  
*Daniel Boon, where are you<sub>[T]</sub>? You're<sub>[T]</sub> the only thing missing from my happiness.*

This mention of Daniel Boon—a real, albeit deceased, person—was counted as a description of the desired other, although the use of T is rather ludic in this case since the reference to Daniel Boon as this woman's ideal man could be perceived as a somewhat romanticized view of a Western hero. A number of personals did, however, make use of second-person pronouns in the description of the desired other, which referred directly to the reader of the ad.

- (7) tu n'est pas compliqué, tu aime la vie, tes<sup>5</sup> simple tout comme moi.  
*you<sub>[T]</sub> aren't complicated, you<sub>[T]</sub> love life, you're<sub>[T]</sub> easy going just like me.*

In this case, the advertiser is directly addressing her reader. Although the existence of her ideal partner is not known, the use of T focuses the description on the referent, putting the reader in the place of the desired other. Other members took this strategy even further. The following example has been reproduced in its entirety.

- (8) Beauté désespérée viens me raconter.  
Tu as une joie de vivre? Tu es pure telle une perle!  
Tu recherche un gars pas trop ennuyant ou intrigant?

<sup>5</sup> The form *tes* or *t'es* ('tu es' = 'you are') is one over several orthographic variants found in French electronic discourse. For an overview of orthographic variation in French-language CMC, see Pierozak (2003) and van Compernelle and Williams (2007).

Souriant, près de la nature, qui aime la vie, aimant faire la cuisine mais encore plus la vaisselle?

Tu es attentionnée, généreuse et autodidacte!

Ca commence drôlement bien...

xx

*Hopeless beauty come talk to me*

*Do you<sub>[T]</sub> have a joie de vivre? Are you<sub>[T]</sub> pure like a pearl!.*

*Are you<sub>[T]</sub> looking for a guy who's not too boring or intriguing?*

*Smiling, close to nature, who loves life, loves to cook but loves washing dishes even more?*

*You<sub>[T]</sub> are attentive, generous and learn on your own!*

*We're off to a great start...*

xx

Example (8) provides an example of how some members of on-line dating networks diverge from traditional or expected discursive norms. Instead of the more typical ad that includes an introduction, some personal information, and a description of the desired other, the young man who posted this ad did so in the form of a 'call to challenge,' examples of which are often found in other forms of advertising, most notably job offers. The reader is implicated to a much greater degree in the 'call to challenge' than in the more traditional model of the personal since the advertiser is not merely stating facts or giving a general description of the desired other; rather, the attention is focused on the reader, allowing him or her to respond to each question or description presented in the ad.

#### 4.4. Second-person pronoun use in invitations to contact

In no other part of the personals considered in this study was T and V use more frequent than in the invitation to contact (every invitation to contact identified in the corpus,  $n = 125$ , included a T or V form). This should not, however, be surprising since an invitation to contact directly implicates the reader as it is his or her responsibility to take action, that is, to contact the member who interests him or her and to initiate one-to-one communication. Example (9), written by a young man, provides a typical invitation to contact.

- (9) Alors bref, si t'a d'autres questions, hésite pas à m'écrire.  
Je vais te répondre avec le sourire, ça va me faire plaisir!  
*So in short, if you've<sub>[T]</sub> got any questions, don't hesitate<sub>[T-imperative]</sub> to write me.*  
*I'll respond to you<sub>[T]</sub> with a smile, it'll make me happy!*

The use of T leaves no doubt as to the direct address of a definite, singular reader. Although the young man represented in (9) did not use T or V in any other part of his personal, second-person pronoun use in the invitation to contact establishes a sort of contract of communication; that is to say, the author sets a condition (i.e., *si t'a d'autres questions*), provides the reader with an opportunity to contact him (i.e., *hesite pas à m'écrire*), and gives a consequence should the reader initiate private, one-to-one communication (i.e., *je vais te répondre avec le sourire*). Recognizing the limitations of the on-line environment (e.g., the limited space for text), some members invite the reader to obtain further details by contacting him or her by e-mail or chat as illustrated by the middle-aged woman in (10).

- (10) Je pourrais vous dire plein de chose sur moi. Mais le mieux serais de me contacter et je vous en dirai plus. Alors a la prochaine j'espère.  
*I could tell you<sub>[Vsg]</sub> plenty of things about me. But the best would be to contact me and I'll tell you<sub>[Vsg]</sub> more. See you<sub>[Vsg]</sub> soon I hope.*

As in (9), the woman in (10) provides a consequence should the reader chose to contact her (i.e., *je vous en dirai plus*). The young woman in (11) uses a similar strategy, refusing to go into too much detail about herself, given the limitations of the on-line dating network.

- (11) je n'en dit pas plus long je te laisse la parole et te répondrai avec plaisir!!  
*I won't tell you<sub>[T]</sub> any more I'll let you<sub>[T]</sub> talk and will be happy to respond to you<sub>[T]</sub>!!*

While the woman in (10) used V, it is not unlikely that T-reciprocity would be established rather quickly in subsequent private one-to-one communication. The young woman in (11), on the other hand, precludes this choice with her use of T; therefore, she most likely expects to be called T in return. Although the examples provided above illustrate the use of either T or Vsg, several invitations to contact included the use of Vpl, as illustrated in (12).

- (12) En résumer, cest moi! Les filles, n'hésiter pas a m'écrire pour en savoir plus sa va me faire plaisir de vous répondre.  
*In brief, that's me! Girls, don't hesitate<sub>[Vpl]</sub> to write me to find out more I'll be happy to respond to you<sub>[Vpl]</sub>.*

The young man in (12) is obviously inviting any and all girls who may see his personal to contact him, which is indicated by *les filles* and the imperative V form *n'hésiter pas*. In addition, it seems reasonable to assume that this young man would contact any number of young women on the site since, according to Groom and Pennebaker (2005:458), men tend to respond indiscriminately to many on-line personals.

#### 4.5. Second-person pronoun use for indefinite reference

In addition to their definite referential values, recent research (Ashby, 1992; Blondeau, 2001; Coveney, 2003; Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003; Laberge and Sankoff, 1980) has shown that T and V are often used for general-indefinite reference at the expense of *on*. This general-indefinite use of T and V was found in several of the on-line personals considered in this study, as illustrated by (13) and (14).

- (13) Ma perception du couple: chacun a sa vie et, en couple, tu la partages avec une personne avec qui t'es bien et qui tu as les même valeurs donc, jalousie et dépendance n'ont pas de place.  
*My Perception of a couple: each person has a life and, as a couple, you<sub>[T-indefinite]</sub> share it with a person you're<sub>[T-indefinite]</sub> comfortable with and who has the same values as you<sub>[T-indefinite]</sub> so, jealousy and dependence have no place.*
- (14) Ce que je n'aime pas chez une fille.  
 Celle qui ne sait pas ce qu'elle veut de la vie.  
 Toujours devoir de faire dire qu'elle est belle! \*Si un gars sort avec vous, c'est qu'il vous trouve belle!!\*

*What I don't like in a girl.*

*One who doesn't know what she wants from life.*

*Always having to be told she's beautiful! If a guy's going out with you<sub>[Vsg-indefinite]</sub>, it means he thinks you're<sub>[Vsg-indefinite]</sub> beautiful!!\**

Although the young woman in (13) uses Vsg for definite reference elsewhere in her personal, she reverts to T for general-indefinite reference. The use of indefinite T for 'situational insertion' (Ashby, 1992), where indefinite *on* would have been just as appropriate, personalizes the text. The reader is placed in the relationship that the young woman is describing, yet the advertiser is also implicated since this type of general-indefinite reference is usually inspired by the speaker's (or in this case, the advertiser's) personal experiences. The young man in (14) uses a similar strategy. In this case, he is telling a general truth, which Laberge and Sankoff (1980) label as 'morals and truisms' (see also Ashby, 1992).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Summary and implications

The analysis presented above revealed that members of on-line dating networks use the T/V system in a number of different ways:

- T and V are used in the majority of personals. This finding suggests that members of on-line dating networks treat the ad as a form of interpersonal communication (i.e., they address a real, definite 'other').
- Comparisons of T/Vsg and Vpl use reveal a general preference for singular address, which indicates an underlying or inferred one-to-one communication and precludes the eventual move to private one-to-one communication, even in an environment that is inherently a form of public one-to-many communication.
- Despite the general preference for singular address, young men tend to use Vpl at much higher rates than any other demographic group. This finding suggests that men aged 18–25 years embrace public one-to-many communication, possibly in the hopes of establishing several private one-to-one relationships simultaneously.
- On a general level, T was preferred to V among those members who used a singular second-person address, which would naturally entail the use of T in any subsequent private one-to-one communication. Although this is not necessarily surprising in the Quebec context, the preference for T demonstrates the extent to which on-line personals are essentially extensions of one's off-line self. In other words, the T/V system operates within the context of on-line dating much as it would in many off-line contexts, where the use of V may add unnecessary formality and/or social distance.

In addition, it is important to note that approximately one-quarter of the personals reviewed for this study included no second-person reference. Although this could be interpreted as an avoidance strategy used by members who are uncertain about the appropriate choice of T or V (Gardner-Chloros, 1991), another possible explanation is that, in the case of on-line dating networks, the absence of second-person address is due primarily to the lack of loci where T/V use could be realized. In other words, those ads in which only 1st and 3rd person references were present were, in general, examples of personals that included only self-promotion and reference to a hypothetical desired other (e.g., *un homme* or *une femme*).

These findings have broad implications for on-line relationships, both romantic and non-romantic, and for CMC more generally. That members of this on-line dating network used T and V as would be expected in non-electronic environments in Quebec (i.e., T preferred over Vsg) demonstrates the extent to which on-line identities are extensions of members' off-line selves. Put another way, CMC users do not exist in a 'vacuum' in cyberspace; rather, their on-line interactions with other real, definite persons complement their off-line interactions and relationships. This finding supports the notion that on-line communities can simultaneously exist with, and perhaps enhance, off-line communities and personal relationships (Mosco, 2004:31). This is especially true within the context of on-line dating, where the ultimate goal is to establish an off-line romantic relationship.

Similarly, the issue of honesty in a communication environment where deceptive self-representation is possible should be addressed. Ellison et al. (2006) found that most (American) on-line dating network members recognize the potential for deceptive self-presentation in this context and therefore attempt to establish their credibility in the personal ad through a number of communicative strategies. The use of second-person pronouns in the Quebec personals may therefore serve to bolster the credibility of the advertisers, especially when T is used as expected in off-line contexts since, as Pires (2004) argued, T can indicate sincerity and truthfulness.

## 5.2. *Limitations and directions for future research*

This study of address pronouns in on-line personal ads from Quebec has provided some insight regarding self-presentation and relationships in on-line communication contexts. However, it is limited in its scope as only one dating network, *Netclub.com*, was considered. Analyses of other on-line dating networks could prove to be rather insightful. Additionally, this study examined only personals posted by men and women from Quebec. Given the global reach of the Internet, future research could explore T and V use in dating ads posted by men and women from other Francophone countries, such as France, Belgium, and Switzerland. Other social factors could also be considered, such as level of education and sexuality (i.e., heterosexual men and women vs. homosexual men and women).

Future sociolinguistics research on computer-mediated communication should also expand the contexts in which T and V are analyzed. Williams and van Compernelle's (2007) study of second-person pronoun use in French chat remains the only other study of T and V use in (non-educational)<sup>6</sup> on-line communication published to date. Other on-line communication environments in which interpersonal relationships can be established and maintained, such as discussion fora, newsgroups, blogs, and so forth, could be analyzed in order to compare and contrast address strategies in these various types of on-line interaction. In addition, future studies could examine other aspects of the French address system, such as names or pseudonyms, titles, and other nominal address forms, since "the forms of nominal and pronominal address do not work as separate systems but in unison, and they should hence not be reduced to a dichotomy" (Busse, 2002:22; see also Martiny, 1996; Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990). This is especially relevant for CMC research since pseudonyms, automatic messages, and other indications of identity vary from one website or interface to the next. Analyses of the address system as a whole, including these related features of on-line discourse, could reveal a number of subtle

<sup>6</sup> Belz and Kinginger (2002) explored second-person pronoun use in an educational telecollaborative setting between American learners of French and German and their native speaker e-mail partners.

sociolinguistic and pragmatic norms and variations in these relatively new forms of electronic communication, as well as the communicative limitations and affordances present in different types of on-line interaction. Lastly, in order to determine to what extent CMC users' on-line identities are extensions of their off-line selves, more research on nominal and pronominal address in off-line contexts is needed.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lawrence Williams for his constructive comments on a preliminary analysis of the data presented in this study. Thanks are also due to two anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Pragmatics* for their critiques of an earlier version of this article.

## References

- Ardehali, Paula-Elizabeth, 1990. Pronoun exchange as a barometer of social change. *Dialectal Anthropology* 15, 82–86.
- Ashby, William J., 1992. The variable use of *on* versus *tu/vous* for indefinite reference in spoken French. *Journal of French Language Studies* 2, 135–157.
- Belz, Julie, Kinginger, Celeste, 2002. The cross-linguistic development of address form use in telecollaborative language learning: two case studies. *Canadian Modern Language Review* 59, 189–214.
- Ben-Ze'ev, Aharon, 2004. *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England.
- Blondeau, H el ene, 2001. Real-time changes in the paradigm of personal pronouns in Montreal French. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 5, 453–474.
- Brown, Roger, Gilman, Albert, 1960. The pronouns of power and solidarity. In: Sebeok, T.A. (Ed.), *Style in Language*. MIT Press, Cambridge, pp. 253–276.
- Busse, Ulrich, 2002. *Linguistic Variation in the Shakespeare Corpus*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Claudel, Chantal, 2004. De l'utilisation du syst eme d'adresse dans l'interview de presse  crite fran aise. *Langage & Soci et * 108, 11–26.
- Coveney, Aidan, 2003. Anything *you* can do, *tu* can do better": *Tu* and *vous* as substitutes for indefinite *on* in French. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7, 164–191.
- Ellison, Nicole, Heino, Rebecca, Gibbs, Jennifer, 2006. Managing impressions online: self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11 (2) [np] <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue2/ellison.html>.
- Fonseca-Greber, Bonnie, Waugh, Linda R., 2003. On the radical difference between the subject personal pronouns in written and spoken European French. In: Leistyna, P., Meyer, C.F. (Eds.), *Corpus Analysis: Language Structure and Language Use*. Rodopi, Amsterdam, pp. 225–240.
- Gardner-Chloros, Penelope, 1991. Ni tu ni vous: principes et paradoxes dans l'emploi des pronoms d'allocution en fran ais contemporain. *Journal of French Language Studies* 1, 139–155.
- Groom, Carla J., Pennebaker, James W., 2005. The language of love: sex, sexual orientation, and language use in online personal advertisements. *Sex Roles* 52, 447–461.
- Grevisse, Maurice, Goose, Andr e, 1993. *Le bon usage: Grammaire fran aise*, 13th ed. Duculot, Paris.
- Gudelunas, David, 2005. Online personal ads: community and sex, virtually. *Journal of Homosexuality* 49, 1–33.
- Hardey, Michael, 2004. Mediated relationships: authenticity and the possibility of romance. *Information, Communication and Society* 7, 207–222.
- Henwood, Flis, Wyatt, Sally, Henwood, Flis, Miller, Nod, Senker, Peter, 2000. Critical perspectives on technologies, in/equalities and the information society. In: Wyatt, Sally, Henwood, Flis, Miller, Nod, Senker, Peter (Eds.), *Technology and In/equality: Questioning the Information Society*. Routledge, London, pp. 1–18.
- Herring, Susan C., 2007. A faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse. *Language@Internet* 1, 2007. [np] <http://www.languageatinternet.de/articles/>.
- Hollander, Paul, 2004. The counterculture of the heart. *Society* 41, 69–77.
- Labege, Suzanne, Sankoff, Gillian, 1980. Anything you can do. In: Sankoff, G. (Ed.), *The Social Life of Language*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, pp. 271–293.
- Martiny, Thierry, 1996. Forms of Address in French and Dutch: A Sociopragmatic Approach. *Language Sciences* 18, 765–775.

- Morford, Janet, 1997. Social indexicality in French pronominal address. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 7, 3–37.
- Morford, Janet, 2001. Modern manners: the “new” middle classes and the emergence of an informal civility in France. *SAE Journal* 1, 23–32.
- Mosco, Vincent, 2004. *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*. MIT, Cambridge.
- Mühlhäusler, Peter, Harré, Rom, 1990. *Pronouns and People: The Linguistic Construction of Social and Personal Identity*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Peeters, Bert, 2006. Nous on vous tu(e)”: la guerre (pacifique) des pronoms personnels. *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 122, 201–220.
- Pires, Mat, 2004. Usages et stratégies de tutoiement dans l’écrit public. *Langage & Société* 108, 27–56.
- Sahib, Padma Rao, Koning, Ruud H., van Witteloostuijn, Arjen, 2006. Putting your best cyber identity forward: an analysis of “success stories” from a Russian Internet marriage agency. *International Sociology* 21, 61–82.
- Smith, Christine A., Stillman, Shanon, 2002. What do women want? The effects of gender and sexual orientation on the desirability of physical attributes of personal ads of women. *Sex Roles* 46, 337–342.
- Téту de Lapsade, Françoise, 2001. *Le Québec: Un pays, une culture*. Boréal, Montréal.
- Thibault, Pierette, 1991. La langue en mouvement: simplification, régularisation. *LINX* 25, 79–92.
- van Compernelle, Rémi A., Williams, Lawrence, 2007. De l’oral à l’électronique: La variation orthographique comme ressource sociostylistique et pragmatique dans le français électronique. *Glottopol* 10, 56–69., In: [http://www.univ-rouen.fr/dyalang/glottopol/numero\\_10.html](http://www.univ-rouen.fr/dyalang/glottopol/numero_10.html).
- Vincent, Diane, 2001. Remarques sur le tutoiement et le vouvoiement en français parlé au Québec. In: *Actes du Colloque “La Journée du Québec,”* Copenhagen, Institut d’Etudes Romanes, University of Copenhagen, pp. 11–22.
- Wales, Kathleen M., 1983. *Thou and you in Early Modern English: Brown and Gilman re-appraised*. *Studia Linguistica* 37, 107–125.
- Whittle, David B., 1997. *Cyberspace: The Human Dimension*. Freeman, New York.
- Whitty, Monica T., Carr, Adrian, 2006. *Cyberspace Romance: The Psychology of Online Relationships*. Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire, England.
- Williams, Lawrence, van Compernelle, Rémi A., 2007. Second-person pronoun use in on-line French-language chat environments. *The French Review* 80, 804–820.
- Yurchisin, Jennifer, Watchravesringkan, Kittichai, McCabe, Deborah B., 2005. An exploration of identity re-creation in the context of Internet dating. *Social Behavior and Personality* 33, 735–750.

## Further reading

- Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Canada, Canada. Aperçu-pays. 25 April 2007. [http://www.intercultures.ca/cil-cai/intercultural\\_issues-fr.asp?lvl=8&ISO=FR&SubjectID=2](http://www.intercultures.ca/cil-cai/intercultural_issues-fr.asp?lvl=8&ISO=FR&SubjectID=2).
- Hearne, Greg, Mandeville, Tom, Anthony, David, 1998. *The Communication Superhighway: Social and Economic Change in the Digital Age*. Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards.

**Rémi A. van Compernelle** is now a Ph.D. student in French Linguistics in the Department of French and Francophone Studies at the Pennsylvania State University. His research focuses on sociolinguistic and pragmatic variation in French-language computer-mediated discourse and technology-enhanced foreign language learning and teaching.