

# **Address and the Semiotics of Social Relations**

**A systemic-functional account of address forms  
and practices in Australian English**

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## Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the realm of the interpersonal: broadly, those linguistic phenomena involved in the negotiation of social relations and the expression of personal attitudes and feelings. The initial contention is that this realm has been consistently marginalised not only within linguistic theory, but more broadly within western culture, for cultural and ideological reasons whose implications extend into the bases of classical linguistic theory. Chapter 1 spells out the grounds for this contention and is followed by two further chapters, constituting Part I: Language and Social Relations. Chapter 2 identifies and critiques the range of ways in which the interpersonal has been conventionally interpreted: as style, as formality, as politeness, as power and solidarity, as the expressive, etc. This chapter concludes with an argument for the need for a stratified model of language in order to deal adequately with these phenomena. Chapter 3 proposes such a model, based on the systemic-functional approach to language as social semiotic. The register category tenor within this model is extended to provide a model of social relations as a semiotic system. The basis for the identification of the three tenor dimensions, power, distance and affect, is the identification of three modes of deployment or realisation of the interpersonal resources of English in everyday discourse: reciprocity, proliferation and amplification.

Parts II and III turn their attention to one significant issue in the negotiation of social relations: address. The focus is explicitly on Australian English, but there is considerable evidence that most if not all of the forms discussed in Part II occur in other varieties of English, especially British and American, and that some at least of the practices discussed in Part III involve the same patterns of social relations with respect to the tenor dimensions of power, distance and affect.

Because most varieties of contemporary English do not have a set of options for second-person pronominal address, as is the case in many of the world's languages, English speakers use names and other nominal forms which need to be described. Part II is descriptive in orientation, providing an account of the grammar of VOCATION in English, including a detailed description of the nominal forms used. Chapter 4 investigates the identification and functions of vocatives, and includes empirical investigations of vocative position in clauses and vocative incidence in relation to speech function or speech act choices. Chapter 5 presents an account of the grammar of English name forms, organised as a paradigmatic system. This chapter incorporates an account of the processes used to produce the various name-forms used in address, including

truncation, reduplication and suffixation. Chapter 6 consists of an account of non-name forms of address, organised in terms of the systemic-functional account of nominal group structure. This chapter deals with single-word non-name forms of address and the range of nominal group structures used particularly to communicate attitude, both positive and negative.

Part III is ethnographic in orientation. It describes some aspects of the use of the forms described in Part II in contemporary address practice in Australia and interprets such practice using the model of social relations as semiotic system presented in Part I. The major focuses of attention is on address practice in relation to the negotiation of gender relations, with some comment on generational relations of adults with children, on class relations and on ethnic relations in nation with a diverse population officially committed to a policy of a multiculturalism. Part III functions simultaneously as a coda for this thesis, and a prologue for the kind of ethnographic study that the project was originally intended to be, but which could not be conducted in the absence of an adequate linguistically-based model of social relations and an adequate description of the resources available for address in English.