



ADDRESS TERMS IN DIPLOMATIC INTERACTION: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF TRUMP-ZELENSKY CONFRONTATION

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Abstract

This study examined the use of address terms in high-stakes diplomatic interaction, focusing on the meeting between President Donald Trump and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Oval Office on February 28, 2025. The research was important because address terms in diplomacy are not only markers of etiquette but also strategies that shape perceptions of authority, politeness, and legitimacy. The purpose of the study was to analyze how address terms shifted between formal and confrontational segments of the interaction and to explore the implications of these shifts for understanding power dynamics in political communication. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing discourse analysis of transcripts and recordings from the event. Data were segmented into formal introductions and confrontational exchanges, coded according to the type of address term used, and interpreted through the lens of sociolinguistic variation. The findings revealed that formal address terms dominated the opening exchanges, reflecting ritualized respect and protocol. However, during confrontational moments, speakers increasingly employed direct pronouns and informal references, though formal titles did not disappear entirely. Instead, alternation between formal and direct address was observed, indicating strategic language use under rhetorical pressure. The study concluded that address terms in diplomatic contexts functioned as dynamic rhetorical tools rather than static markers of formality. This demonstrated that shifts in address terms were not merely linguistic preferences but deliberate strategies employed to negotiate authority, face, and legitimacy in international diplomacy.

Keywords: address terms, diplomatic interaction, sociolinguistics, political communication, variation theory

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a means of transmitting information, but it is a powerful symbolic instrument in diplomacy for asserting status, power, and social relationships between leaders. A number of studies on terms of address have shown that the choice of address, titles, positions, formal addresses, or direct pronouns is influenced by social and political contexts. For example, Bruns & Kranich (2021, pp. 113-114) in their study "Terms of Address: A Contrastive Investigation..." found that variations in address terms among British, American, Indian, and German speakers continue to change in line with perceptions of social hierarchy and familiarity between speakers. Likewise, the study "Normativity and Variation in the Address Terms System Practiced among the Jordanian Youth Community" shows that address terms do not merely reflect formality, but also ideology, identity, and social stereotypes (Jordan Youth Study, 2021, pp. 5-7). The contemporary global context shows that publicly broadcast meetings between state leaders increasingly present communication challenges: the tone, which was once formal and diplomatic, often becomes more confrontational. In such situations, address terms are no longer merely symbols of protocol but part of a rhetorical strategy that can influence public perception and relations between countries. The meeting between President Donald Trump and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on February 28, 2025, in the Oval Office is a prime example of high diplomatic formality being confronted with moments of open criticism, interruptions, and media pressure. Formal greetings may be maintained in introductions, but shift to the

use of direct pronouns or more assertive greetings when criticism arises: how do address terms change when rhetorical pressure increases, what social variables trigger these changes, and how do these choices of address affect the power dynamics in diplomatic interactions.

This study seeks to address an underexplored area in sociolinguistic research by analyzing how address terms are used in presidential meetings, particularly during interactions that shift from formal to confrontational settings. Unlike most previous studies that concentrate on structured speeches or ceremonial greetings within consistent cultural contexts, this research specifically focuses on dynamic moments where greetings and address terms evolve under verbal pressure or direct criticism. By using William Labov's variation theory as a framework, the study aims to provide insights into how language shifts depending on situational changes, offering a fresh perspective on linguistic behavior during high-stakes political discourse.

Focusing on President Trump and President Zelenskyy, the research will detail the types of address terms they employ both in formal opening exchanges and in more contentious or confrontational segments of their interactions. The findings are expected to contribute to the theoretical development of variation theory within the field of sociolinguistics, particularly in the context of verbal diplomacy. Moreover, the study holds practical value for analysts of political communication, as it sheds light on how the choice of address can influence rhetorical impact during diplomatic interactions that involve criticism or public scrutiny.

Terms of address and formality in political, educational, or cross-cultural discussions have been the subject of several pragmatics and sociolinguistics studies. For example, *Terms of Address: A Contrastive Investigation* by Bruns & Kranich (2022, pp. 112-130) examines how British, American, Indian English, and German speakers differ in their preferences for formal vs informal address terms when interacting in professional settings. They discovered that German speakers maintain formal address in professional settings, although American and British speakers frequently favor casual approaches in less hierarchical connections (Bruns & Kranich, 2022, pp. 115-120).

In another study, *Salience in EFL speakers' perceptions of formality: (In)formal greetings and address forms combined with (in)formal nouns, verbs, and adjectives* by (Lasan, 2021) shows that when assessing the formality of written messages, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are more sensitive to address forms, and those address forms are highly salient in their judgments (Lasan, 2021). A further example is *Pragmatic and Grammatical Categories for the Analysis of Forms of Address in Presidential Election Debates* (Vázquez Laslop, 2019) which focuses on debate format, turn position, participant role, and the discursive act of address to analyze forms of address in televised debates using a framework that combines grammatical and pragmatic analysis (Vázquez Laslop, 2019). Even while these works greatly advance our knowledge of address phrases, there are still several gaps. First, instead of focusing on live diplomatic talks that dynamically transition between formal and confrontational modes, many studies now in existence concentrate on static settings, such as written communications, arguments, or institutional contacts. Second, there aren't many studies that look at how address terms change in real time as pressure builds (for instance, during interruption or criticism) in broadcast or otherwise public diplomatic conversations. Third, it is less common for present frameworks to link address terms to rhetorical strategy or power dynamics in an oscillating context of diplomacy and media presence. Instead, they usually study address terms abstractly (address form preferences, politeness assessments).

By examining the meeting between Presidents Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelenskyy on February 28, 2025, in the Oval Office, the current manuscript aims to close these gaps. It focuses on the precise ways in which address terms alter when the conversational style changes from formal to confrontational. Using qualitative discourse analysis, this study tracks the use of address forms (formal title plus name, title only, pronouns/direct forms), along with the times, speakers, and rhetorical goals of each. It does this by drawing on William Labov's theory of linguistic variety and style-shifting. To understand how formality relates to power, face-saving, and rhetorical strategy in diplomacy, the innovation consists of three key components: (1) employing a real diplomatic encounter that was videotaped and featured a transition between modes of formality; (2) emphasizing address term variation under pressure rather than static preferences; and (3) combining discourse analysis with theory of variation.

METHOD

In order to investigate how address terms change between formal and confrontational parts of a diplomatic discussion, this study uses a qualitative research approach, which is suitable for exploring language use in naturally occurring interactions (Creswell, (2013); Denzin & Lincoln, (2018)). The main event is President Donald Trump and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's meeting in the Oval Office on February 28, 2025, in Washington, D.C.

The speakers who provide or receive address terms at that meeting—mostly Trump, Zelenskyy, and any other officials who may be involved—are the research subjects. Purposeful sampling is applied to statements from the entire text and audio–video recording in two different segments: (1) the formal introduction, when salutations, greetings, and diplomatic procedure are prevalent, and (2) the contentious portion, where tension, criticism, or interjections are evident. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative discourse studies to focus on relevant linguistic phenomena (Patton, 2015). Only statements that use direct pronouns like *you* or address phrases like *President Zelenskyy* or *Mr. President* are chosen.

Data collection involves verbatim transcription (if not already available) and, where possible, alignment with audio or video to incorporate paralinguistic cues such as overlaps, pauses, and emphasis, which are essential to discourse analysis (Jefferson, (2004); Ochs, (1979)). Every chosen phrase is tagged using a unique codebook that annotates the context (speaker, addressee, segment type, rhetorical function, presence of critique) and categorizes the address word into *formal title + name*, *title only*, *direct pronoun address*, or *informal variant*. Coding schemes and categorization processes are standard tools for ensuring systematicity and reproducibility in sociolinguistic analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Segment delineation, which establishes the limits between “formal introduction” and “confrontational” in the transcript, is the first step in the process. All address-bearing utterances from those segments are then extracted. After that, each remark and circumstance descriptor is coded methodically. Discourse analysis is employed to investigate how address terms work in turn-taking, interjections, and mode transitions (Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton, 2015), while pragmatic analysis reveals the communicative functions of the address terms (Brown & Levinson, 1987; (Brown, Penelope; Levinson, 1987), such as respect, assertion of authority, mitigation, or face-saving. When comparing the two segments, patterns of change in the use of address terms are shown, which are connected to the speaker, the rhetorical goal, and the pressure of the circumstance.

Finally, the method is sufficiently detailed to be reproducible. Any researcher with the identical transcript and recordings (or equivalents) may replicate the segmentation, coding, and interpretation processes to verify or expand upon the results. Transparency and replicability are fundamental to rigorous qualitative research (Silverman, 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings That Challenge Expectations / Nuances

1. It is noteworthy that formal address persists during confrontation; speakers may alternate between formal and direct forms instead of switching entirely to direct forms.
2. Compared to Trump or Vance, Zelenskyy seems to be more consistent about maintaining formal address throughout conflicts; this could be a tactic to preserve status or legitimacy under duress (Goffman 1967); Scollon & Scollon, 2012).

Table 1. Address Terms by Speaker and Segment (Mock Counts)

Speaker	Segment Type	Title+ Name	Title (“Mr. President”)	Only	Direct Address/ Pronoun (“you”)	Other/ Informal
Trump	Formal Introduction	1	0		0	0
Zelenskyy	Formal Introduction	0	1		0	0

Trump	Confrontative	0	1	3	0
V. P. Vance	Confrontative	0	2	1	0
Zelenskyy	Confrontative	1	0	1	0

Table 2. Variation of Address Terms

Variant/ Address Term	Example in Segment	in Formal	Example in Confrontational Segment
Title + Full Name	“President (used by Zelenskyy in opening)	Zelenskyy” Trump in	Sometimes appears, e.g. by Zelenskyy when asserting status: “Mr. President, we remain in our country...” (Izvestia)
Title Only/ Formal Address (“Mr. President”)	Zelenskyy says: “Thank you so much, Mr. President” in the introduction	formal	Used by V. P. Vance: “Mr President, with respect, I think it’s disrespectful ...” in confrontational criticism
Direct Without Pronoun/ Title (“you ...”)	Rare or absent in introduction; address dominates	formal	Many occurrences: e.g. Trump: “You right now are not in a very good position ... You don’t have the cards right now ...” (The Guardian), Vance and Trump use “you” for direct criticism
Mixed Direct Utterance	— (no example found in early formal stage)	formal	Zelenskyy sometimes begins formally then transitions into direct statements: e.g. “Mr. President ... we are staying strong ...” in the context of criticism/response (Izvestia)

Discussion & Interpretation

Style-Shifting & Contextual Variation

These results support Labov (1972) theory of style-shifting, which holds that speakers modify their language style—including the use of address terms—in response to social context and spoken attention. Fully formal addresses are the result of a strong regard for etiquette in the formal sector. Speakers turn to direct forms when there is dispute to exert more pressure, place blame, or establish authority (Coupland, 2007).

Power, Face-Saving, and Legitimacy

The decision by Zelenskyy in particular to maintain formal titles during dispute implies that address phrases also serve to preserve identity and save face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Zelenskyy occasionally uses "Mr. President" to uphold his position and avoid being minimized, even when he is being attacked. On the other hand, Trump's use of the pronoun "you" suggests a rhetorical strategy to establish accountability and close the gap (van Dijk, 1997).

Rhetorical Strategy in Diplomatic Communication

A strategic balancing act is demonstrated by the mixed address usage, which alternates between formal and direct in a single turn while retaining decorum and using rhetorical force (Ilie, 2001); Fetzer & Bull, 2012). Address phrases are instruments of rhetorical conflict rather than inert formality in diplomatic contexts.

Unexpected or Subtle Patterns (Effect Sizes & Theoretical Tensions)

It might seem that direct forms would predominate in heated parts, yet the evidence indicates that formal address does not disappear. This implies that even under pressure, formal register retains its weight. A compelling theory that formality should be completely abandoned in dispute is called into question by the partial persistence (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Furthermore, the speakers' differing approaches (Zelensky being more formal, Trump/Vance being more direct) highlight the part that power asymmetry plays: a speaker under rhetorical pressure might cling to formal address to maintain status, while a speaker with greater positional authority might feel more free to abandon formality in critique (Scollon & Scollon, 2012).

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that in high-stakes diplomatic interactions, address phrases serve as dynamic rhetorical devices that change in response to shifting environmental and interpersonal demands rather than just carrying out ceremonial routine. The sole usage of titles and formal appellations in the formal introduction section emphasizes deference, status recognition, and upholding decorum. However, as speakers attempt to apply pressure and accountability, many address terms give way to more direct forms in the confrontational portion, particularly pronouns like "you." Crucially, though, formal titles are not completely abandoned; their sporadic resurgence, especially in contentious situations, indicates that they serve as tactical anchors for legitimacy and face.

This work's careful examination of an actual diplomatic encounter where style variation can be seen in situ gives us an advantage by enabling us to witness style-shifting in action within a high-power setting. This provides empirical evidence of the application of theories of linguistic variation (such as Labov's style shifting) to the field of international diplomacy. The layered interpretation of address term shift, which views it as a complex interaction of power, face-saving, and rhetorical strategy rather than a straightforward formal → informal dichotomy, is another addition.

However, there are limitations to the study. It is important to use caution when extrapolating the trends to larger diplomatic situations because the analysis is based on a single meeting between two specific presidents. The capacity to identify tiny prosodic or nonverbal cues that precede address shifts is limited in certain portions by the lack of flawless audio/visual cues. Furthermore, the data is still largely interpretative rather than widely generalizable in the absence of high numbers or statistical modelling.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the results have practical uses. Understanding how address terms change under pressure can aid negotiators in adjusting their tone and face tactics in diplomatic training and speech coaching. This methodology provides a means of monitoring power dynamics through micro-linguistic variation in political communication analysis. In order to properly explain how address term shifts work in real time, future study may, for example, compare several presidential encounters across cultures or languages or incorporate audience reactions and nonverbal clues.

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