

American forms of address

1960 - 1976

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

Titles of address, use of proper names, and greetings reveal something of the structure of a community. Many choices of forms of address are available for use in our everyday speech. These include title (such as Dr.) and surname, a kinship title and first name, a first name, a variation of a first or last name or what we might call a nickname, a term of endearment, and a term of insult. The form of address we choose to use is determined by our relationship to the person addressed, and by the attitude we wish to convey as part of the message.

Language reflects society. If we experience uncertainty about our language choices it is often because of an unsettled situation in society. Many Americans find it especially difficult to choose appropriate feminine forms of address from the list: Mrs., Miss, or Ms. The uncertainty we display in making a selection reflects a problem in society, a problem about individual identity.

Forms of address perform an important role in communication. I believe that a discussion of the origins, the rules governing usage, the connotations, and the attitudes people display concerning these forms of address can show their importance in the process of communication. Such a discussion will also reveal some aspects of the continually

changing sociolinguistic attitudes in America. The thesis will concentrate on the titles Mr., Mrs., Miss and Ms.

II. THE BROWN AND FORD AND THE ERVIN-TRIPP STUDIES

Listing in a table the forms of address in our system and then stating generally some determining factors for choosing the acceptable and appropriate form would make the choice appear simple, but when the structural relationships are taken into account the complexity of the system emerges. Susan Ervin-Tripp, a scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, developed the diagram reproduced on page 4 to demonstrate the organization of address choices.¹

The person whose knowledge of address is represented in the diagram is assumed to be an adult in a Western American academic community. The diagram resembles an information system flow chart with the entrance on the left. Paths lead to possible outcomes or various forms of address. The set of paths is a way of representing a logical model, not of a mental process used by people, but of the forms of address that are possible and appropriate. The diamonds of the diagram are selectors pointing to different paths with the direction governed by the conditions indicated in the diagram. Each path leads to a possible outcome which is one of the alternative forms of address. These outcomes are shown in squares at the far right of the diagram. In

¹Susan Ervin-Tripp, "On Sociolinguistic Rules: Alternation and Co-occurrence," In Directions in Sociolinguistics, Dell Hymes and John Gumperz, ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972) p. 219.

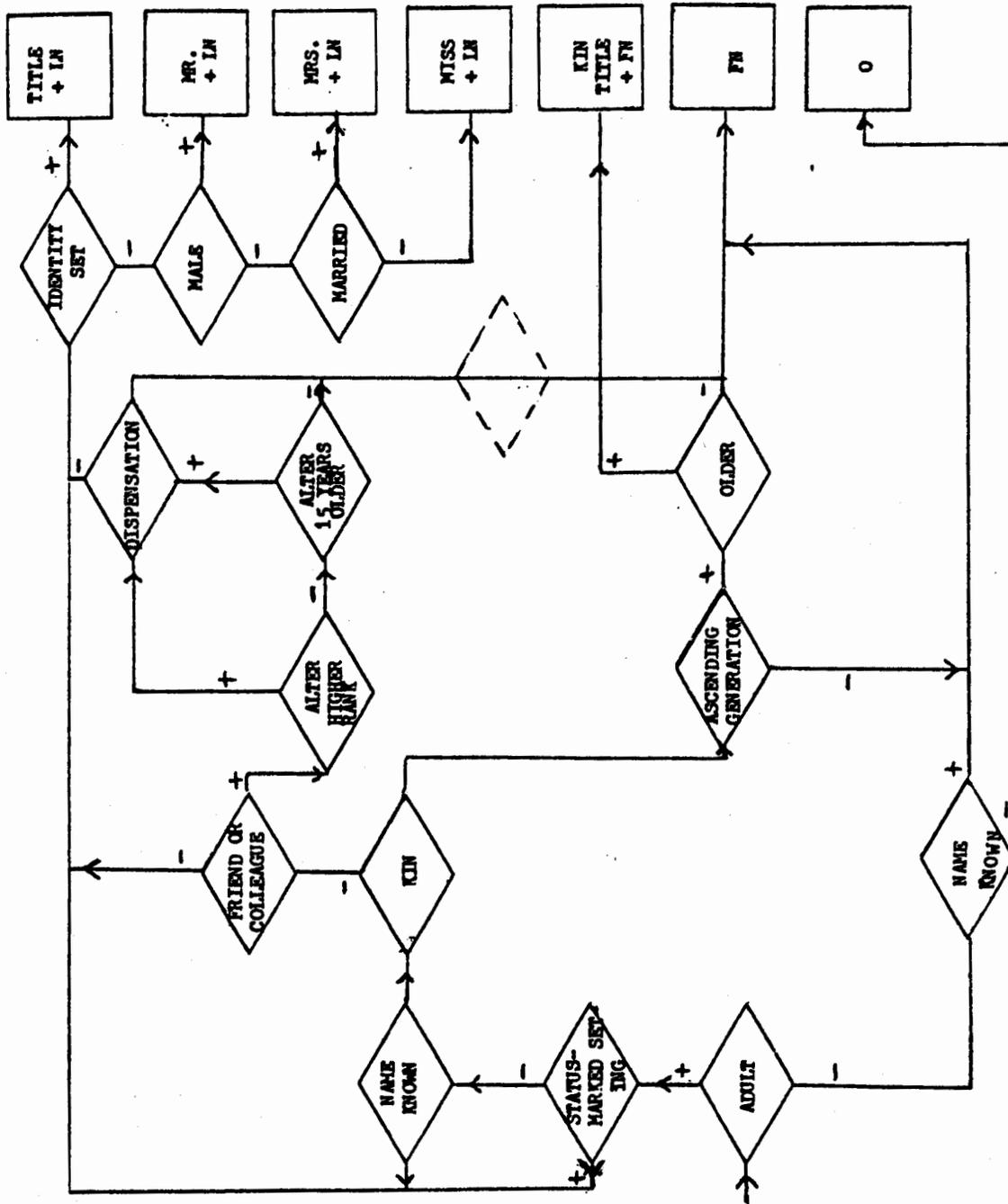


Figure 1. American Address

current scholarship on address "T", "LN", and "FN" are abbreviations for title, last name, and first name respectively.

The Ervin-Tripp diagram presents American address forms in a way that is easily understandable. Its value and usefulness are displayed by the several references made to it throughout this thesis.

Roger Brown and Marguerite Ford collected data to show that the choice of the forms of address used in American speech is relational.² In other words, the form of address selected by persons reflects how the speakers are associated. Brown and Ford used three main sources to gather information for their study. These sources included forms of address used by the actors in modern American plays, forms of address used by employees with one another in a Boston business firm, and forms of address used by business executives who were participating in a program at MIT. The address usage varied depending upon the roles being played and the positions held by the various speakers.

Brown and Ford observed that Americans have an option of using first names or of using a title with a last name when addressing one another. They found two main patterns involving the choices of FN and TLN. These are called

²Roger Brown and Marguerite Ford, "Address in American English," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 62, No. 2 (1961), 375-385.

reciprocal and nonreciprocal patterns, and each has situations governing appropriate usage. A reciprocal pattern is one in which the speakers mutually exchange either FN or TLN. The selection of FN or TLN as the form of address is dependent upon the degree of intimacy shared in the relationship of the speakers. Often a relationship begins with TLN then proceeds quickly to a mutual FN basis.

If one speaker uses FN and the other speaker responds with TLN, a nonreciprocal pattern is being used. Age difference can cause the nonreciprocal pattern to be used. A child would say TLN to an adult and receive FN. Likewise fifteen years difference between the ages of two adults could generate this pattern.³ A difference in occupational status also can cause a nonreciprocal pattern to be employed. A person with a higher occupational status would receive TLN and give FN to an individual in a lower ranking position. A status designation not necessarily relating to occupation can be observed in male and female verbal interaction. Males use FN for females more often than females use FN for males.

Most speakers choose the appropriate forms of address that are included in Ervin-Tripp's diagram and follow the patterns discussed by Brown and Ford, but sometimes these

³Ervin-Tripp also includes the fifteen year age difference as a selection feature in her diagram. See Figure 1.

rules are violated. Analysis of such violations points out the strong social significance of both the rules and the violations.

The following conversation is an example of the accepted choices and patterns being disregarded. It takes place in a southern city in the United States, and the participants are a white police officer and Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a black psychiatrist from Harvard University. Dr. Poussaint's car had been stopped by the officer.

"What's your name, boy?" the policeman asked.
 "Doctor Poussaint. I'm a physician."
 "What's your first name, boy?"
As my heart palpitated, I muttered in profound humiliation:
 "Alvin."⁴

Viewing objectively and making use of the information in the Ervin-Tripp diagram, one finds several ways that the police officer insulted the physician by his choices of forms of address. When he included "boy" in his first utterance the officer used a racial identification. "Boy" is the degrading form of address used by prejudiced southern whites to Blacks. It is also used by older and or more powerful white people to insult those younger or weaker. Poussaint's adult status was denied him by the use of this form. This situation was a status marked setting to the

⁴Alvin Poussaint, "A Negro Psychiatrist Explains the Negro Psyche," New York Times Magazine, 20 Aug. 1967, p. 52.

extent that the policeman was in a recognizable position because of his uniform. Poussaint could have included "Officer..." when addressing the policeman. The next selector in the chart has to do with name known or not. Poussaint's name became known to the officer. The two men were not related nor were they friends or colleagues. Moving to the squares at the far right of the Ervin-Tripp diagram one realizes that an identity set, which is a special title that can be used with an individual, was applicable because Poussaint identified himself as a physician. This occupation in our society deserves a title of Doctor. According to the diagram a stranger should never address a doctor by his first name.

One may argue that this situation did not take place in a Western American academic community to which Ms. Ervin-Tripp confines her diagram. However the widespread knowledge of this address system is suggested by the success the police officer had in humiliating Dr. Poussaint; both knew the system and the social significance of its violation. Peter Farb's discussion of the interaction between Dr. Poussaint and the police officer in his book Word Play pointed out how the rules of address were broken.⁵ Dr. Poussaint indicated by his reply to the officer's question that he preferred to be identified by his profession.

⁵Peter Farb, Word Play (New York: Bantam, 1975), p. 3.

However, he followed the rules that the police officer had set up rather than those accepted by most Americans.

Poussaint had been stripped of all deference due his occupation and age by the words someone chose to address him.

Dr. Poussaint's experience also illustrates an aspect of the Brown and Ford study which lists occupational status as a characteristic of a nonreciprocal pattern. In American society a doctor is thought to be more prestigious than a police officer. Therefore, Dr. Poussaint should have expected to be addressed by TLN and could have addressed the speaker with FN if it became known to him.

As I began researching the topic of forms of address I became more attentive to the address forms employed by the people around me. The following are personal observations.

The first time the woman called she identified herself as "Rhonda" in a warm friendly voice. She was calling to find out when an invoice was going to be paid. The person she wished to speak with was not in and did not return Rhonda's call as she had requested. As Rhonda called again several times over a period of weeks her voice became less friendly with each call, and she began to identify herself as Rhonda Farrell. Finally, she eliminated her first name, and the crisp voice on the telephone belonged to Mrs. Farrell.

As the Brown and Ford study showed, the initial exchange for two American adults is that of TLN changing to FN as the

relationship develops.⁶ Rhonda Farrell reversed this pattern in her telephone conversations. She used FN as she introduced herself, but when the relationship did not progress as cordially as she had anticipated she chose to acknowledge a change in attitude by selecting other forms of address. Had she introduced herself as Mrs. Farrell the relationship probably would not have progressed any differently. Her use of language showed that she was aware that TLN expressed more formality than FN. When she wanted to be more business-like she changed her language.

Adults are not the only ones who perceive and manipulate the forms of address. A family had guests for dinner one evening. Sally, a twelve-year-old member of the host family, addressed one of the guests, Mr. Chapman, who was an older man. When she mischievously said, "Say, John...", a noticeable break in the flow of conversation occurred. The other people present were as aware as Sally that she had challenged a pattern in the forms of address rules. For some reason Sally had wanted to change the relationship, at least verbally, by her choice of address. Sally sought to overcome the barrier of age difference by turning the nonreciprocal pattern into a reciprocal one.

I have stressed that forms of address are important in communicating with one another and that linguistic scholars

⁶Brown and Ford, p. 376.

study and report on forms of address. In daily speech one can find examples of speakers following rules that govern forms of address and also people deliberately violating these rules by making a conscious choice to alter a relationship. The discussion which follows reports on individual forms of address in American speech today and points out their usage as parts of our linguistic system.

III. CURRENT FORMS OF ADDRESS: MR., MRS., MISS, MS.

The four major titles of address that Americans use are Mr., Mrs., Miss and Ms. The importance of these titles can be seen best by a discussion of their individual origins, rules for usage, and their connotations.

Mr. was originally an abbreviation for Master in the 16th and 17th centuries. Mister, the weakened form of Master originated from reduced stress in proclitic use. The abbreviation Mr. has been retained since 1447.⁷ That Mr. is usually used with a last name would indicate that the person addressed is viewed as an adult. The TLN usage reveals the relationship of the speakers as newly acquainted or that the person being addressed is approximately fifteen or more years older than the addressor. The marital status of a male is not disclosed when the title Mr. is used.

The feminine titles of Miss, Mrs. and Ms. are all three derived from the word Master. Both Mrs. and Miss are abbreviations of the word mistress, which is the feminine form of mister, the weakened form of master. Ms. is considered to be a combined form of Mrs. and Miss.

⁷Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford, England: University Press, 1933).

The correct pronunciation of Mrs. is [mis'ɪz].⁸ Rules of usage have changed over the years. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a woman's age was the determining factor in choosing Mrs. as the correct form of address. Any mature female was addressed as Mrs.⁹ A similar practice is still followed today in Poland. The English recently practiced this form of address as was evidenced in the British television program "Upstairs, Downstairs." The Butler, Mr. Hudson, explained late in the series that "the title Mrs. was an honorarium enjoyed by cooks of a certain class."¹⁰ Mrs. Bridges might have been perceived quite differently by television viewers had her single marital status been known all along, because the forms of address can assign socially ascribed roles to people. These roles carry expectations.

In American the use of Mrs. is restricted to that of a marital status marker. Connotations of Mrs. include both success and security. If women are supposed to marry, then Mrs. is the label of success. A Mrs. is secure because she has a man to take care of her— or so it is presumed.

⁸Webster's Third New International Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1976), p. 1481. All phonetic notations included in the thesis are from this dictionary, unless otherwise noted.

⁹Oxford English Dictionary.

¹⁰Casey Miller and Kate Swift, Words and Women (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 100.

Until recently Miss has been the only other choice of a social title to apply to an adult woman. Miss, a shortened version of mistress and pronounced [mis], has carried several meanings through history. In the seventeenth century besides meaning an unmarried woman or girl, this title could refer to a kept mistress.¹¹ Used with a surname, Miss often identified the oldest daughter in a family. Modern use continues the unmarried status marker with Miss, but the title sometimes connotes squeamishness or sentimentality of a young girl. For many persons Miss shows failure because the bearer of the title has not achieved marital status. The latter meaning was reflected in the teaching of one of my primary school teachers, who taught students to remember Miss as unmarried because the female had "missed catching a man."

The most recent addition to our forms of address system is Ms. The origin of this expression is uncertain. One source stated that Ms. was the end product of a deficiency choice of a computer that was not given enough information.¹² Mary Ritchie Key, in Male/Female Language, reports that Ms. was included in secretarial handbooks many years ago.¹³

¹¹ Oxford English Dictionary.

¹² Anon. "Ms. America," Newsweek, 26 April 1971, pp. 61-62.

¹³ Mary Ritchie Key, Male/Female Language (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975).

However, she does not document this statement, and my search through older books of this type did not yield a source.

An article in the magazine Ms. refutes the claim that Ms. is of recent origin.¹⁴ Mariwyn Somers has found that Ms. appears on grave stones dated in the early eighteenth century. In cemeteries in Massachusetts many stones included Ms. presumably as a shortened version of Mrs., because other writing on the stones sometimes identified the deceased as a widow. It would be valuable to discover why this form of address for women could appear briefly then disappear for over 200 years.

The pronunciation of Ms. has created a problem since it was reintroduced. Possible pronunciations were listed by Alma Graham, Associate Editor, Dictionary Division of the American Heritage Publishing Company, including [mIs], [mIz], or sounding the two separate letters [em], [es].¹⁵ Today the pronunciation is standardized as [mIz] by Ralph DeSola in Abbreviations Dictionary¹⁶ and also in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary.¹⁷

¹⁴Mariwyn Somers, "Ye Olde Ms.," Ms., 5, No. 11 (1977), 21.

¹⁵Alma Graham, "Letters to the Editor," New York Times, 20 Dec. 1971, p. 34, col. 5. Graham's notation is as follows: "mis" or "miz" or two separate letters em, es.

¹⁶Ralph DeSola, Abbreviations Dictionary (New York: American Elsevier, 1974), p. 236.

¹⁷Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1976), p. 754.

Many persons object to the pronunciation [mIz] because it is thought to reflect the nonstandard dialect of the South. For Russell Baker, [mIz] reminds him of the language of the servants in Gone With the Wind.¹⁸

One could use E. Bagby Atwood's findings to rebut those who think that [mIz] is exclusively the pronunciation of a southern nonstandard dialect. Atwood's study reported that many informants in the South Atlantic area and some New Englanders pronounced Mrs. as [mIz].¹⁹ Atwood found that the social origin and education of the speakers had less influence on the pronunciation than the speed of utterance. Over two-thirds of the cultured informants used the short form [mIz] for Mrs. or Miss in rapid speech. If Atwood's informants pronounce Miss and Mrs. identically they may be somewhat ahead of the rest of the nation in omitting marital status indicators in terms of address.

Ms. is widely used today by those people who feel that a marital status marker is as irrelevant for a woman in American society as it is for a man. Ms. is a form of address used to denote a person of feminine gender, regardless of her age or marital status.

¹⁸Russell Baker, "'Murm' and 'Smur', Please," New York Times, 24 Oct. 1972, Sec. 4, p. 15, col. 6.

¹⁹E. Bagby Atwood, "The Pronunciation of 'Mrs.'," American Speech 25, (1950), 10-18.

The connotations of Ms. vary. Many opponents of using Ms. as a form of address associate it with many of the negative attitudes felt toward the women's movement. People who favor adopting Ms. as a standard form of address feel that it expresses individuality and independence.

IV. ACCEPTANCE OR REJECTION OF MS.

It is obvious from the hesitation many people experience about using Ms. in everyday language that this expression has not been completely accepted into the American forms of address system. The people who feel reluctant to use Ms. include some married women who feel threatened by eliminating the medial r from their title. The status of success and security that they enjoy as a Mrs. is taken away. Some women say that Ms. has no charm and that Mrs. is more dignified. A number of single women object to using Ms. because they feel that since it obscures their single status, men are not aware that they are available and unattached.

Jean Stafford, a playwright, objects to Ms. as a form of address because she feels that these two letters combined are assigned enough meanings already--ms for manuscript, motorship, mail steamer, and millisecond, and MS for Master of Science, or Multiple Sclerosis.²⁰

Amy Vanderbilt, an authority on etiquette, did not see any necessity of including Ms. in our American forms of address. For her the rules of etiquette allowed Miss to be used if the marital status of a woman is unknown.²¹

²⁰Jean Stafford, "Don't Use Ms. with Miss Stafford, Unless You Mean ms," New York Times, 21 Sept. 1973, p. 36, col. 1.

²¹Amy Vanderbilt, "The Title 'Ms.'," Ladies Home Journal, 89, No. 10 (1972), 56.

The strongest proponents of Ms. are those persons who feel that a woman's relationship to a man is not important information. Eleanor Holmes Norton, a recent chairman of the city of New York Commission of Human Rights, has stated "A person's performance, character, and personality--should not be judged on whether married or not."²² Women who do not want to have their performance judged on whether or not they are married feel it is unfair to have their marital status included in their names and prefer to use Ms.

A man's marital status is not included in his name, and many women object to this situation. To overcome the objection of the unknown male marital status, Donald Hook has offered some suggestions in "Sexism in English Pronouns and Forms of Address."²³ He feels that it is more efficient to add a second male title equal to Miss, than to attempt to add a third feminine title of Ms. Hook suggests using Mr. for married men, Master to identify unmarried men, Mrs. for married women, and Miss to identify unmarried women. For these people who insist on expanding the choices of forms of address, Hook suggests including Mrs., Miss and Ms. for

²²Enid Nemy, "Ms. Isn't Sweeping the Nation the Foes of Miss/Mrs. Find," New York Times, 22 Oct. 1971, p. 35, col. 5. Norton advocates using Ms. to accomplish this goal.

²³Donald Hook, "Sexism in English Pronouns and Forms of Address," General Linguistics, .4, No. 2 (1974) 89.

females and Mr., Master and Sir to parallel these forms for men. Ms. and Sir would represent unidentified marital status. Hook would prefer to see Ms. eliminated from our choices of forms of address, primarily because he doesn't like the pronunciation.

Results of a 1973 Gallup Poll published in the Los Angeles Times show that the term Ms. as an alternate form to Miss or Mrs. is not readily accepted by many Americans.²⁴ The survey included 773 men and 776 women who were interviewed at over 300 different locations in the United States. When participants were asked "Do you approve of the use of Ms. as an alternate to Miss or Mrs.?" The response was as follows:

Persons in survey who had not heard or read of Ms. = 32% women
43% men

All persons in survey:

Approve - 19% Disapprove - 28% No Opinion - 16%

Women

Approve - 21% Disapprove - 34% No Opinion - 13%

Men

Approve - 37% Disapprove - 22% No Opinion - 18%

Women were then asked "Would you, yourself rather be addressed as Ms. or as Miss or Mrs.?" They answered as follows:

²⁴ Anon. "'Ms.' Usage Slow to Gain Favor," Los Angeles Times, 12 March 1973, sec. 4, p. 12, col. 1.

Married Women

Ms. - 6%	Mrs. - 89%	No Opinion - 5%
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Single Women

Ms. - 2%	Mrs. - 84%	No Opinion - 14%
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One can see from these results that as late as 1973 Ms. was not accepted by a large portion of the population. Language preference reflects attitudes, and one of the main reasons for the resistance to Ms. is the reluctance to change the status of women.

Some people believe that adding Ms. as a form of address completely evades an important issue. They feel that our American address system is sexist, and that any changes should attempt to eliminate sexism. Thus, it has been suggested that we eliminate all current forms of address and establish one nonsexist form. Varda One, publisher of the Los Angeles underground newspaper Everywoman, would like to see the title Person substituted for "Mister, Missus, and Miss." She states that she can find no reason why people should be addressed according to their sex when other characteristics such as eye and hair colors or height or race are not included. Ms. One proposes Pn. as an abbreviation for Person.²⁵ Bess Myerson, a television personality, suggests using Citizen as an asexual form of address.²⁶

²⁵ Israel Shenker, "Is It Possible for a Woman to Manhandle the King's English?" New York Times, 29 Aug. 1971, p. 58.

²⁶ Nemy, p. 35.

Both sex and age discrimination would be lessened by using one common form of address according to One, Myerson and others. Their assumption is that once the same form was used by and for men, women, and children, social attitudes would change dramatically. However those people who advocate eliminating varied titles do not appear to understand why titles must and will exist. Having only one accepted form of address would be a leveling force unacceptable to most people. Titles are status markers; they indicate achievement. In our society titles are linked with achieved personal attributes. Some married women who dislike being referred to as Ms. do so because they desire to have their status acknowledged. Mrs. reflects an achievement.

Studies also support the statement that the forms of address used reflect the importance of achievement. The work of Roger Brown and Marguerite Ford has been mentioned earlier. These scholars found that a nonreciprocal pattern in forms of address was generated by two kinds of relationships. These included a difference in age and a difference in occupational status. In a situation where a younger person had a higher occupational status, it was found that the form of address used was in accordance with the occupational status, not the age of the person.²⁷ Personal achievement reflected in

²⁷Brown and Ford, p. 377.

occupational status demanded more deference than an ascribed attribute such as age.

In response to a concern at Yale University as to how female instructors should be listed in the yearly bulletin, ninety students were asked to evaluate several course descriptions in terms of enjoyableness and intellectual stimulation those course descriptions seemed to promise. Eighty-eight of these students were males. Included with the course descriptions that the students received were names of the instructors of the courses with forms of address varied among Miss, Mrs., Ms., Mr., or initials and last name only. Results of this study showed that the instructor's title had an effect on how those ninety students rated the courses. Table 1 expresses these results that were based on a 0-9 scale.²⁸ These results show nontechnical courses were rated as potentially less enjoyable and not as intellectually stimulating if taught by a Miss or Mrs.

Because the study was limited to only ninety students of one department at one university it was decided to replicate the experiment with a more heterogeneous population. High school seniors in ten different classes at a New York City High School were asked to respond to a questionnaire that included course descriptions and instructors' names with

²⁸Madeline E. Heilman, "Miss, Mrs., Ms., or None of the Above," American Psychologist, 30, No. 4 (1975), 516-518.

Table 1
Means of Subjects' Factors Scores

Experiment 1					
Course	Title				
	Miss	Mrs.	Ms.	Mr.	No Title
Enjoyableness Factor					
Nontechnical	3.7	4.1	5.6	5.8	5.0
Technical	4.2	3.7	3.1	3.5	4.0
Intellectual Stimulation Factor					
Nontechnical	4.3	3.9	5.9	6.2	6.0
Technical	5.5	4.9	4.5	4.5	5.0

varying titles. The results from this second experiment that included 160 student respondents were very similar to those recorded in Table 1. In the nontechnical courses Miss and Mrs. provoked greater negativity both in ratings of enjoyableness and intellectual stimulation. Courses taught by instructors using Ms. as a title of address rated comparable to those taught by Mr. or no title instructors.

When evaluating the technical courses the students did not display the discrepancies in judgment among the forms of address of the instructors, perhaps because the participants in the study felt that any woman capable of teaching a technical course would be extremely competent.

Two groups of students, those from Yale, and the high school seniors, were used in this study, but the participants were all quite similar. They were almost all males and all either college-bound or in college. Larger, more varied groups may have provided more valuable information. As an epilogue to her comments on the study, Ms. Heilman adds that Yale University now offers women faculty members a choice of Mrs. and Ms. as forms of address to use in the bulletin. Ms. is the most frequently selected one.

In the Ervin-Tripp diagram, p. 4, the squares on the far right contain alternate forms of address. Four choices are available for nonkin adults: title plus LN, Mr. plus LN, Mrs. plus LN, and Miss plus LN. The feminine choice is determined by marital status alone. The diagram can be expanded to include Ms. as an additional fifth choice, a choice that counters the assumption a woman must be identified by her relationship to a man. Figure 2, p. 26, reproduces only the part of the diagram necessary to illustrate the addition.

A great deal of discussion has involved the two letters "M" and "S" in recent years. Whether or not these letters combined become comfortably accepted in our everyday language still remains to be seen. I see Ms. as a logical addition to our American address system. The letters follow the pattern that we have established in our other forms of address--all

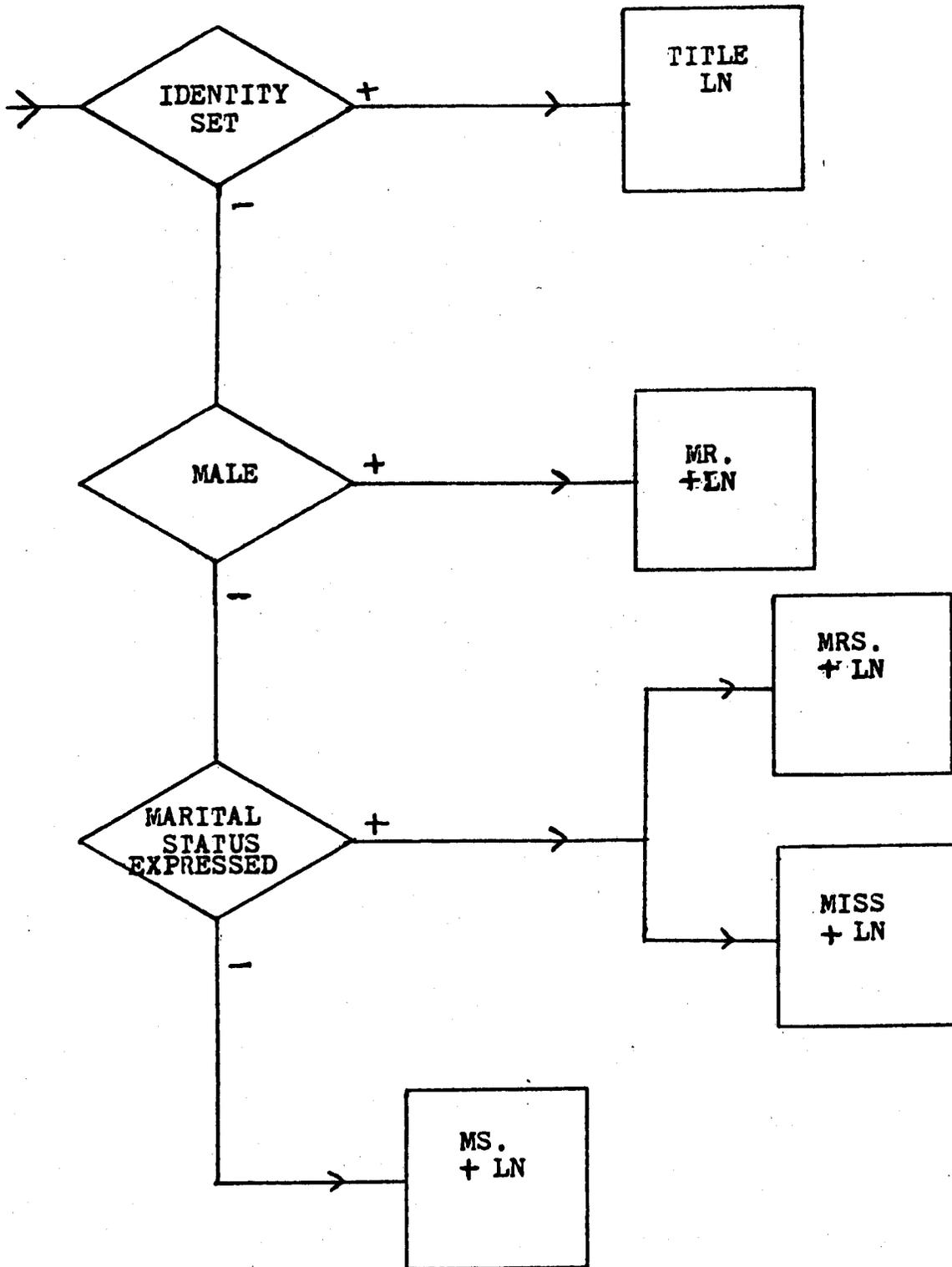


Figure 2. American Address (Revised)

begin with M and all contain the sibilant in their pronunciation if not in actual spelling. Therefore, Ms. follows a linguistic pattern already established. If American society becomes more and more sensitive to the individual, our language will reflect the attitude changes. Ms. as a form of address recognizes a woman as an adult individual, just as Mr. recognizes the adult status of a man. Therefore, the addition of Ms. to our address system is, or can be, a sociolinguistic reflection of emerging equivalence of social status.

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