

# Addressing web users: a case study of Slovene and English promotional websites

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## **Povzetek**

Prvi stik s spletno stranjo podjetja je ključnega pomena, saj pomembno vpliva na odločitev spletnega uporabnika o tem, ali se bo na spletišču zadržal ali pa ga zapustil. Prvi stik spletnega uporabnika s spletno vsebino podjetja najpogosteje predstavlja domača spletna stran. Jezik, ki se tam uporablja, ima skupaj z nebesedilnimi vsebinami pri sprejemanju te odločitve ključno vlogo. Namen prispevka je osvetliti vprašanje strategij naslavljanja, ki v preteklosti niso bile pogosto predmet raziskav, in sicer na primerljivem korpusu slovenskih in angleških spletišč term. Analiza oblik naslavljanja na trženjskih spletnih straneh se osredotoča na naslednje kategorije: velelniške oblike, raba zaimkov, posredne oblike naslavljanja, retorična vprašanja in druge oblike. Rezultati pričujoče pilotne študije tridesetih domačih spletnih strani – izvirnih slovenskih, prevedenih iz slovenščine v angleščino in izvirnih angleških – kažejo, da je na izvirnih angleških spletnih straneh raba različnih oblik naslavljanja precej pogostejša, prav tako pa prihaja do razlik v strategijah prevajanja. Prispevek obravnava tudi z naslavljanjem povezano temo, ki je specifična za slovenščino, in sicer vprašanje rabe vikanja in tikanja v velelnem naklonu.

**Ključne besede:** oblike naslavljanja, slovenska in angleška trženjska besedila, domače spletne strani, vikanje in tikanje

*"How we say something is at least as important as what we say; in fact, the content and the form are quite inseparable, being but two facets of the same object."*

Ronald Wardhaugh

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the highly competitive world of online marketing, where the decision whether to stay on the website or not is made in the first ten seconds (Nielsen 2011) and where a website is visited less often if it is slower than a close competitor by more than 250 milliseconds (Lohr 2012), it is clear that every detail that can keep the web user on the website and every feature that appeals to him/her has to be considered. The relationship a website creates with web users is crucial for retaining them on the website and in the case of promotional websites potentially turning them into customers. The language of the website is of key importance in establishing rapport and one of the more prominent features facilitating it is the way in which web users are addressed.

Exploring the issue of address terms in intercultural communication, Clyne et al. (2004) make the observation that "address rules are rarely adequately described in textbooks or grammars, and the existence of similar deictic dichotomies across languages, even closely related ones, offers no basis to assume a similar set of functions." Similarly, Wardhaugh (2006) warns of "possible dangers in cross-cultural communication when different relationships are expressed through what appears, superficially at least, to be the same address system." He goes on to note that "the use of a person's first name in North America does not necessarily indicate friendship or respect." When a web user creates an account on a Slovene online store, logs in and is greeted by *Živjo Janez, kaj te pa danes zanima? – Hi John, what are you interested in today?* (the account user's first name and the *T*-form personal pronoun are used), one wonders whether the informality of the website in addressing its user is due to a conscious attempt to achieve a cordial, friendly relationship, or the influence of a foreign website (and/or cultural) template. Clyne et al. (2009) note that British English address practices now "include an increasingly widespread use of first names in work contexts and service encounters" and they speculate on the possible influence of American English patterns. Issues such as these play an important role in contributing towards a persuasive company website and as research of intercultural differences in address forms is lacking, the aim of the present article is to try to bridge this research gap at least for the pair of Slovene and English.

In the field of intercultural differences, two researchers share a pioneering role – Geert Hofstede and Edward Hall independently developed cultural frameworks

that would facilitate a more systematic exploration of various cultures and the identification of similarities and differences between them. Searching for universal categories of culture, Hofstede (1980) devised a typology consisting of five (later more) categories: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism/Collectivism, Masculinity/Femininity and Long-Term Orientation. Hall (1976) developed the concept of context, where cultures can be placed on a scale ranging from low-context to high-context. In the former, the objective communication message is seen as being of primary importance, whereas the context plays a secondary role. According to Singh and Pereira (2005: 55), "low-context cultures are logical, linear, action-oriented, and the mass of information is explicit and formalized. Communication is expected to proceed in a rational, verbal, and explicit way". In high-context cultures, where close-knit communities are prevalent, primary importance is attributed to everything surrounding a message and the message itself is of secondary importance. As a consequence, there is a lot of "reading between the lines".

In order to analyze culturally specific rhetoric on websites, Singh and Pereira (2005) developed the Cultural Values Framework (CVF), which is based on the above mentioned Hofstede's and Hall's cultural dimensions and consists of a set of operational website features associated with each cultural dimension. The use of the CVF for the analysis of Slovene and English websites has proved that culturally specific rhetorical differences do exist (Grad 2014). As Slovenia's scores or rank for all categories of the CVF are on the opposite end of the spectrum compared with Anglo-American countries (the UK, the USA, and Australia) (Hofstede et al. 2010), we can hypothesize that address forms on Slovene websites will differ accordingly, i.e. English websites will make use of more address forms, resulting in a more engaged, aggressive sales approach, and will use more explicit and direct means of addressing web users.

## 1.1 Forms of address

Braun (1988:7) defines address as "a speaker's linguistic reference to his/her collocutor(s)." Forms of address are thus defined as "words and phrases used for addressing," and as they refer to the collocutor, they contain a strong element of person deixis. In most languages, forms of address can be expressed nominally (names, titles, kinship terms, abstract nouns), pronominally (pronouns), or verbally (inflectional suffixes).

It should be noted that both Slovene and English also allow for an avoidance strategy where the speaker does not have to use any address term, or may at least temporarily postpone it. In English, for instance, a website may address its website users

by a simple "Welcome to /... /", likewise in Slovene (*Dobrodošli v /... /*). Other languages, however, do not have the option of employing an avoidance strategy, as Wardhaugh (2006) observes, the French, for instance, cannot say "Bonjour, Au revoir, Merci, or Pardon without attaching an address term." However, even without employing any address terms, in Slovene the verbal suffix reveals whether the verb is in singular or plural form, which can indicate the level of formality depending on one's interpretation. Namely, the plural verb suffix is ambiguous, as it may be a proper plural form used for addressing multiple website users, or it could be a polite *V*-form address.

Also, Reindl (2007) observes that Slovene has a unique system of address, as it differs from the basic binary address system of many European languages grammatically distinguishing four levels of formality: informal, semiformal (*polvikanje*), formal, and ultra-formal (*onikanje*). The formal (*V* form) and the informal (*T* form) are commonly used, although apart from the conventions of a particular situation governing the choice of one or the other, the choice of *T* or *V* forms also somewhat depends on personal preference. The non-standard semiformal address, a hybrid combining the formal plural pronoun and verb forms and the informal singular form of accompanying adjectives or participles, which are marked for gender (e.g. *Gospod/Gospa, vi ste pa res iznajdljiv/ iznajdljiva* vs. the formal *iznajdljivi; Sir/Madam, you truly are ingenious.*), is mostly limited to certain regions and semiformal or relaxed business communication (Toporišič 2000). The semiformal address is an attempt to simultaneously show respect by using plural pronoun and verb forms, which create distance, but at the same time also express a friendly attitude typical of a reciprocal informal relation. The ultra-formal address makes use of the 3rd person plural form of the verb to show even greater distance, and consequently reverence, but is nowadays obsolete and only used for its comic effect or other special purpose.

## 1.2 Types of address: nominal and pronominal

The seminal article by Brown and Gilman (1960), "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity", is widely considered one of the most influential studies on the issue of address forms. It identified two principles determining the usage of *T/V*<sup>1</sup> forms in English, French, Italian, Spanish and German. The first principle is that of power and the second is that of solidarity. The former is a non-reciprocal, asymmetrical relation, whereas the latter is inherently reciprocal or symmetrical. According to Brown and Gilman (1960:256), in medieval times the nobility used *V* forms to address one another to show mutual respect and politeness, whereas

<sup>1</sup> They propose the use of *T* and *V*, derived from Latin singular pronouns of address *tu* and *vos*, as generic designators for a familiar (*T*) and a polite (*V*) pronoun in any language (1960: 254).

the common people used *T* forms with one another. However, the upper classes addressed the common people using *T* forms, but expected and received *V* forms in return. This non-reciprocal nature of the *T/V* form usage started to symbolize a power relationship. Through time, mutual *V* form usage became the norm for expressing politeness, whereas mutual *T* form became a marker of solidarity.

Brown and Gilman (1960:260) make an interesting observation on the principles of the loosening of relations in modern times:

There is an interesting residual of the power relation in the contemporary notion that the right to initiate the reciprocal *T* belongs to the member of the dyad having the better power-based claim to say *T* without reciprocation. The suggestion that solidarity be recognized comes more gracefully from the elder than from the younger, from the richer than from the poorer, from the employer than from the employee, from the noble than from the commoner, from the female than from the male.

Therefore, being addressed informally by an entity such as a website that you normally expect to make use of *V* form address terms may come as a surprise. Depending on one's background, age, education, personal preferences etc., a *T* form address strategy may be considered appropriate and even favored over more formal address options. On the other hand, a website employing such an approach may be perceived as crude, offensive and unprofessional, as the web user or online customer may deem him/herself the superior in the relationship and, therefore, as Brown and Gilman (*ibid.*) suggest, the one in position to initiate the change, or simply be of the opinion that a mutual *V* form address is appropriate for the communication between a business entity and a consumer.

Compared with Slovene, the English pronominal system of address is very straightforward and limited. Modern Standard English only has one pronoun of address, namely *you*, which itself has no *T/V* distinction, nor does it influence the corresponding verb form. Clyne et al. (2009) note that the pronoun *thou* is nowadays only used in certain dialects or particular communities. As English lacks the pronominal means for creating social distinction, this is achieved by nominal forms of address such as Sir/Madam or the use of proper names.

### 1.3 Online forms of address – a lack of guidelines

With the *T/V* distinction being an integral part of the Slovene language and a substantial quantity of original as well as translated or localized websites, one would expect to find guidelines for the appropriate use of the forms of address on the web. Unfortunately, there is an unexpected lack of documentation provid-

ing such guidelines. In most cases, the topic is briefly covered on websites giving rather vague advice to enterprises on how to conduct business in the form of the "dos and don'ts" of online communication, but the issue is not covered from the linguistic point of view. The issue is most comprehensively presented by LUGOS, the Linux User Group of Slovenia, who defines rules for translating KDE<sup>2</sup> programs into Slovene. They define the relation between the computer and the user, and state that the computer should use the *V* form in addressing its user, whereas the user should make use of the less formal *T* form.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, user command options directed at the computer to initiate an action are in the *T* form imperative, e.g. *Odpri*, *Shrani*, *Zbriši*, *Izreži*, *Zapri*, etc. (their *V* form equivalents would be: *Odprite*, *Shranite*, *Zbrišite*, *Izrežite*, *Zaprte*; Open, Save, Delete, Cut, Close), but the computer prompts should be in the more formal *V* form imperative, e.g. *Izberite*, *Vnesite*, etc. (vs. *Izberi*, *Vnesi*; Choose, Insert). The latter is sometimes fairly ambiguous, as in the context of marketing websites the computer is merely the digital means through which the company communicates with its target audience, and as a result there is a borderline between the user giving commands to the computer and the company prompting its user to perform a certain action. The following example illustrates a fairly common ambiguity of reference, as it is not clear whether *V* or *T* forms are actually used: *Preberi več* (*Read more*) – rather than this literally being a command by the user to the computer to read something to him/her, it can be considered a command by the user for the computer to open the document to be read by the user. Alternatively, it could, of course, also be perceived as a prompt on the part of the website/company to the user to do so. In this case, however, the *T* form address could be viewed as (too) informal and thus problematic. The analysis yielded several similar examples, which are presented in the results section.

## 2 CORPUS AND METHOD

### 2.1 Corpus

The present case study is based on a corpus that consists of three sets of spa website home pages: Slovene home pages in Slovene (SL-SL), the same set of Slovene home pages translated into English (SL-EN), and English home pages written in English (EN). Each set comprises ten web pages for a total of thirty. The corpus is fairly limited in size with an overall length of 7,969 words: SL-SL 2,834, SL-EN 2,393, and EN 2,742 words. As has already been mentioned in the introductory paragraphs, one of the primary goals of a website's home page is to persuade the

<sup>2</sup> KDE, K Desktop Environment, a desktop environment for UNIX workstations.

<sup>3</sup> <https://wiki.lugos.si/slovenjenjepravila>

web user to stay on the website and the language that is used certainly plays an important role in this.

The following criteria were used for the selection of the Slovene websites: the websites of the Slovene companies needed to have an English version and in cases of spa chains (Sava hoteli, Krka) only one representative was chosen to avoid the possibility of common authorship that would influence the language used on the websites. The English spas were chosen based on the information from a specialized guide (<http://goodspaguide.co.uk/>) to form a comparable corpus. Similarly, one of the criteria was diverse ownership, which ensured varied website authorship. Additionally, none of the companies could be part of an international spa chain (even if based in Britain), as that could mean that the website was based on an internationalized foreign language template, or was itself such a template to be localized into other languages.

## 2.2 Method

The corpus was analyzed manually and annotated for the following categories: imperative forms, pronouns, indirect address forms, rhetorical questions, and miscellaneous address forms. It is worth noting that in Slovene the *T/V* form distinction can be made for most of these categories and this has some very important implications that are discussed in the following sections of the article. As the overall length of individual home pages is very limited and thus not necessarily representative, the results for individual categories are not presented empirically, as a single additional instance of a certain form of address could alter the results significantly even if they were normalized to a 10,000 word sample. The numerical results are only used to emphasize unexpected differences in preferences for a certain address form on an individual home page, or between the Slovene website and its English translation.

Imperative verb forms appear on hyperlinks, in the description of what the spa offers, and elsewhere, e.g. in requests for the web user's email address. As mentioned above, the *T/V* distinction, which has the potential to significantly alter the tone and consequently the level of formality, is also expressed in Slovene imperative forms. Sometimes this distinction is made inadvertently, as can be observed from the inconsistencies on the same web page. In some instances, however, the use of *T/V* forms is ambiguous, as the direction of communication is not entirely clear, i.e. whether the website is addressing the web user, or whether the imperative form is used on behalf of the web user giving commands to the computer to execute a certain operation, e.g. *Spremeni/odpovej rezervacijo*; *Change/cancel reservation*. The former ranges from real imperatives, e.g. *Enjoy your stay*,

to directives, e.g. *Enter your email*. These issues are presented and discussed in the following section.

Pronouns present a similar problem, as the *T/V* distinction can also be observed here. In addition to the inadvertently mixed usage mentioned above, Slovene pronouns also blur the difference between the polite singular (*za vas* – for you (single person)) and the neutral, potentially informal plural reference (*za vas* – for you (two or more)).

The category of indirect address refers to all instances where the addressee is referred to by a specific description which is neither an imperative verb form nor a pronoun. In Slovene the same nominal indirect address distinguishes two possible verb forms, the choice of which can alter the level of directness, e.g. *šudenti imajo dodaten popust* vs. *šudenti imate dodaten popust* – the first one merely states that (all) students have additional discount (3rd person plural), whereas the second one directly addresses the demographic group of students (2nd person plural). This ambiguity is lost on English websites. One of them, for instance, claims that *!...! guests can indulge in !...!*, which would only pose a dilemma if it were translated, as the translator would have to decide on the level of directness.

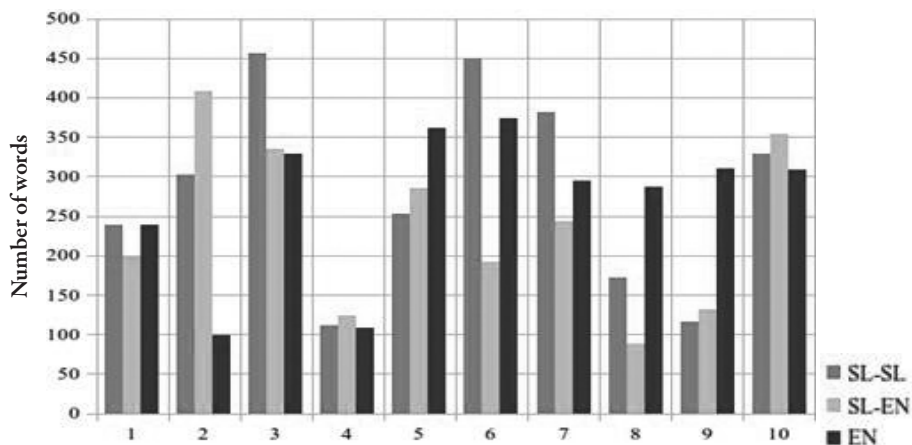
Rhetorical questions, e.g. *Want to be informed?*, address the web user directly and engage him/her into a virtual dialogue where the web user is expected to "answer" by performing some sort of a task, e.g. clicking on a hyperlink, filling out a form, etc.

The group of miscellaneous address forms comprises all instances of address, mostly indirect, ranging from references to larger groups, e.g. family; spa treatment names which consist of first person pronouns, entire sentences written in the first person singular (cookie use notification statement), etc.

### 3 RESULTS

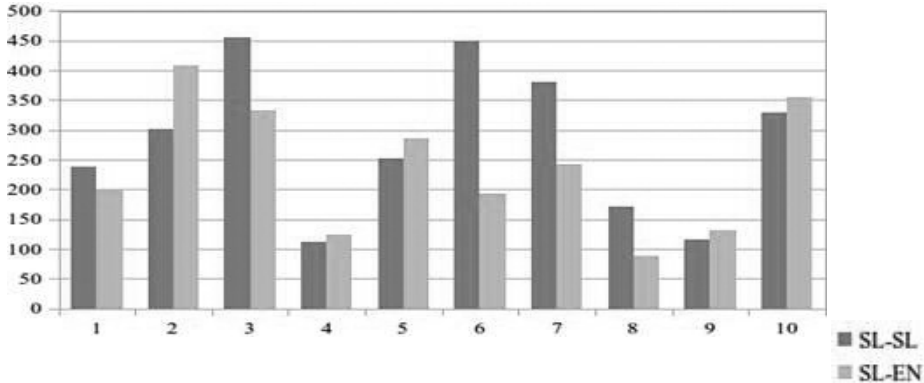
As the scope of the home page of a website is restricted to a single web page, the website designers and the company's marketing strategists need to strike a balance between the amount of verbal and non-verbal information. The amount, the impact, and the interaction between them should be as persuasive as possible, but as there is a lack of consensus on what that constitutes, the length of the text of the analyzed home pages differs significantly, ranging from a textually minimalist 111 words for the Slovene to an even more succinct 99 words for the shortest English home page; on the other end of the spectrum, the longest Slovene home page is 449 words long and the English is 373 words in length.





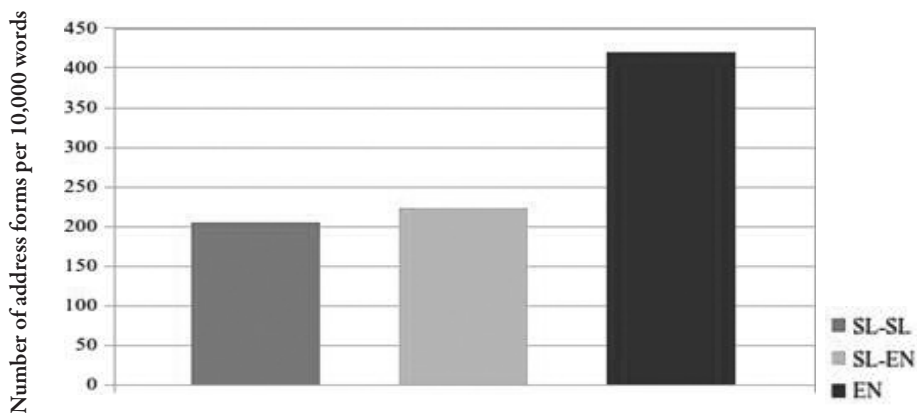
**Chart 1: Length of home pages**

Significant differences can be observed in the scope and consequently the length of the translated Slovene home pages compared with their source, which reveals the underlying differences in the purpose and consequently the strategy of the translation. Some companies opt for a fairly faithful translation strategy, resulting in a comparable home page text length (6/10 Slovene home pages fall in the +/- 20% range), others minimize the scope and consequently the cost of the translation, retaining merely the necessary information (5/10 English versions represent a downscaling of the content, 2 of which falling in the 20% range mentioned above), but there are also instances of home pages having more textual content in the translated versions where the companies wanted to add content specific to the foreign customers (5/10 home pages were longer in their translated versions, but 4 of these fall in the 20% range). Another possible reason for the latter scenario could also be that the translated websites have a simpler general structure, which would mean that more information would have to be provided on fewer web pages including the home page. The average length of Slovene home pages (280.4 words) is very similar compared with the English (270.7 words), but the Slovene translated home pages exhibit an average reduction of 18.8% compared with their source texts for an average length of 236 words.



**Chart 2: Differences in length (Slovene home pages and their translations into English)**

Bearing in mind the limited scope of the material, quantitative analysis only seems relevant for the combined length of each of the three parts of the corpus and the combined results of all categories of address. It can thus be suggested that overall English home pages seem to exhibit more address forms, as the combined number for all categories that were analyzed is 115 per 2,742 words (419 per 10,000 words). The respective result for the Slovene home pages is 58 per 2,834 words (204 per 10,000 words), which is 51.3% less than in the English home pages. It is interesting to observe that the Slovene home pages translated into English exhibit a combined number of address forms of 63 per 2,834 words (222 per 10,000 words), which presents a slight increase of 8.8% over the source web pages.



**Chart 3: Combined number of address forms per 10,000 words**

The analysis of address forms yielded some very interesting results. Even though the limited scope of the corpus only justifies frequency results for entire sets of home pages, there are certain deviations that are worth highlighting. In the sub-corpus of English home pages, which range from 99 to 373 words in length, in 9 out of 10 the combined number of address forms ranges from 5 to 13. The home page of one English spa, however, contains a total of 28 address forms on 294 words, which is more than twice as many as any other English home page. Out of the 28, there are 18 imperatives. In comparison, 8 imperative verb forms or fewer could be found on other home pages.

A marked difference can also be observed in the number of address forms between Slovene home pages and their English translations. On a particular home page, which has a translated version of similar length (within 20%), the home page contains 16, whereas the English translation contains a total of only 9 address forms. Another example of a Slovene home page with an English translation of comparable length, however, yields the opposite result, i.e. the number of address forms on the original home page of 3 is a significantly smaller than that of its English translation, which has 7; the notification on the use of cookies, which was not part of the analysis, contains an additional 4 for a total of 11.

Two Slovene websites stand out due to their very low number of address forms. Even though both are fairly short with a length of 111 and 116 words, respectively, the first one contains one (imperative) and the other two (one pronoun and one indirect address) address forms. Their English translations with lengths of 123 and 132 words exhibit two (pronouns) and zero address forms, respectively.

There is also one Slovene spa home page that exhibits a significant increase in the number of address forms in its English translation. Surprisingly, the source home page contains no address forms of any type, whereas the English version has 11 (three imperatives and 8 pronouns).

## 4 DISCUSSION

Bearing in mind the observations made by using the CVF (Singh and Pereira 2005, Grad 2014), one would expect to find a more direct and explicit sales approach on the English websites resulting in a greater number of address forms and the use of more direct forms. Generally this can be confirmed even though idiosyncratic preferences can be observed in both original subcorpora. If the Slovene website designers and translators were aware of these general differences, they could implement these changes when translating the Slovene websites into English to more closely reflect English conventions. This would give the websites

a more authentic feel and consequently reduce the cognitive load required to process them, which has been suggested to make online texts more persuasive (Whitenton 2013). On certain translated websites this seems to be the case, as they exhibit an increase in the number of address forms compared with their source texts. Whether the observed difference is the result of a conscious decision and awareness on account of the translator is unclear. However, two other scenarios have also been observed, i.e. either the number of address forms is more or less the same as that of the source text, or, even more surprisingly, that the opposite occurs – the translated web pages actually contain fewer address forms than the source text, making them even less direct. This indicates that address forms are either not recognized by translators as an intercultural issue where differences between the two languages/cultures occur, or this is only the case for some translators.

Alternatively, the difference between the expected and actual results in the number of address forms could also be attributed to changes in the content. Foreign language versions of some Slovene websites have a very limited scope of content compared with their source text counterparts, which suggests that they are re-designed rather than merely translated. But even if the content is changed, the rhetorical impact the website aims to achieve should be the same, which in turn would call for a more direct sales approach and consequently a greater number of address forms, albeit in a different context.

In Slovene the distinction between *T/V* forms in the imperative mood is very striking when they appear juxtaposed on the limited space of a single web page. The formal *V* form imperative in the function of encouraging the web user to choose a certain spa treatment, e.g. *Doživite Wellness pravljico (Experience a wellness fairytale)*, or directing the web user to perform a certain action, e.g. *Preverite ekskluzivno ponudbo! (Check out our exclusive offer!)*, can be seen as conforming to conventions of respectfully addressing an unknown, heterogeneous population. Likewise, the informal *T* form imperative is used according to conventions when it appears in commands made by the web user to the computer to initiate a certain action, e.g. hyperlinks such as *Rezerviraj (Make a reservation/Book now)* or *Potrdi rezervacijo (Confirm reservation)*. However, some websites also make use of the informal *T* form imperative on hyperlinks in a different function as the latter and thus do not comply with general conventions, e.g. *Priporoči prijatelju (Recommend to a friend)* or *Preberi več (Read more)*. It is reasonable to assume that such inconsistencies certainly influence the overall tone and consequently the persuasiveness of the website.

In addition to these clear inconsistencies, there are also borderline cases where it is unclear whether the web page is addressing the web user in an inappropriately

informal *T* form way, or the *T* form address is meant as a command of the web user to the computer, e.g. *Spremeni/odpovej rezervacijo* (*Change/cancel reservation*) – is the web user giving a command to the computer, or is the company providing the web user with this option?

Some websites, however, completely avoid the issue of Slovene *T/V* forms in the imperative by using a gerund instead, e.g. *Subscribe to benefits and novelties* is the English rendering of the source phrase *Prijava na E-novice* (instead of the ambiguity of *Prijavi se* vs. *Prijavite se*).

## 5 CONCLUSION

The results clearly indicate that the number of address forms on English website home pages is significantly higher (205,4%) than that of comparable Slovene home pages, which confirms the hypothesis based on the observations of intercultural differences between Slovene and English (Hofstede 1980, 2010). An overall increase in the frequency of address forms of 8.8% was also observed in English translations of Slovene websites, but due to large discrepancies between individual home pages and the limited scope of the analyzed material, it cannot be claimed with any degree of certainty that this increase is the result of a conscious effort to reflect the English conventions.

The present case study is an exploration of an interesting, relevant, and largely under-researched culturally specific issue, which should certainly be studied further, preferably on a larger scale, including other types of web pages, websites, or even genres. In addition to increasing the size of the corpus, the typology of address forms could also be expanded, as the increase in the scope of the analyzed material would also facilitate a contrastive analysis of less frequently occurring address forms.

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