

Instructors' Address Forms Influence Course Ratings

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When evaluating potential new courses, students take into account the address forms of the instructors. Seventy college students rated the desirability of courses based on their syllabus descriptions. Syllabi differed only in the presentation of the instructors' names with seven variations in their address listings: Dr, Professor, Mr, Ms, Mrs, Miss, or No Title. Results indicate that instructors' address forms had a significant effect on course ratings. Specifically, courses with the instructor labeled with an academic title (i.e., Professor, Dr) received higher ratings than those with a generic title (i.e., Mr, Ms, Mrs, Miss), and those with a male address form received higher ratings than those with a female address form. Unlike previous studies, the three female titles of address — Ms, Mrs, and Miss — were evaluated similarly, suggesting that connotative differences in meaning among these address forms are disappearing.

KEYWORDS address forms, academic titles, generic titles, course ratings, gender

Introduction

Forms of address are the linguistic forms used when introducing oneself or for addressing others. As discussed in Brown and Ford (1961), these address forms are complicated from an onomastic perspective as their use is governed by the complex relationship between the speaker and the addressee. As Murphy (1988) further points out, the selection of address forms is largely a socially driven phenomenon, used to help establish the tone of a communicative exchange, specify degrees of politeness, and index social status.

Many languages encode or partially encode different forms of address directly into their grammar. For example, in many Romance languages, speakers are constrained by the language to choose between formal and informal “you” when addressing any communicative partner, and in Asian languages such as Japanese and Korean, formality distinctions are not only marked between the speakers and addressees but also to any third person referenced in the conversation (Saeed, 2009). Various factors may influence these linguistic choices — such as differences in age, intimacy, and social

distance between the speaker and addressee. However, native grammars rarely articulate specific rules for selecting among these linguistic choices; instead, for native speakers these decisions are largely unconscious, as they acquire the appropriate uses of these forms through natural use and observation (Musumeci, 1991).

Languages like English do not grammaticalize differences in informal versus formal address between the speaker, listener, or others. However, it is still possible to mark social distinctions in such languages through some alternative means, such as lexical selection. For example, in English, speakers can use various forms of a name (e.g., first/last name/nickname) and/or title (e.g., Mr, Mrs, Dr) when addressing a communicative partner. While speakers have some degree of flexibility when it comes to selecting address forms for themselves and others, these choices are not entirely without consequence.

Heilman (1975) found that, when evaluating courses based on syllabus descriptions, male students took into account the address form of the course instructor. Specifically, courses taught by instructors who were labeled as “Mrs” or “Miss” received more negative judgments than comparable courses taught by instructors who were labeled as “Mr,” “Ms,” or with no title (just their initials and surname only). Using a series of semantic differential ratings, Dion (1987) had both male and female students convey their impressions of various stimulus persons who were identified by different titles. He found evidence for a “Ms stereotype” in that women who called themselves “Ms” were viewed as being more assertive, dynamic, and motivated than those who called themselves “Mrs” or “Miss;” however, they were also viewed as being less warm and less likely to fulfill interpersonal goals. In addition, Dion found that male students were more prone than female students to perceive a Miss stimulus person as being unsuccessful in interpersonal and career goals and a Mr stimulus person as being more successful. Dion’s findings suggest that both titles of address and student sex affect instructor evaluations.

Crawford et al. (1980) also used the semantic differential technique to evaluate address titles and found that the title Ms conveyed a more masculine than feminine interpretation. Moreover, women who used “Ms” were perceived as being active and powerful, but less likeable and good than those who used “Mrs” or “Miss.” However, in a subsequent study, Crawford et al. (1998) discovered a change in the perception of Ms. In this study, they found that Ms as a title had lost its masculine interpretation and was viewed by both male and female students as more similar in semantic interpretation to Mrs and Miss. Crawford et al. proposed that, while Ms was perceived as a radical feminist innovation when it was first introduced, today its use is unremarkable and even normative.

The use of professional titles in academia such as “Professor” and “Dr” add additional complications when it comes to the selection of address forms in university settings. Takiff et al. (2001) found that male professors are more likely to be addressed by a title (specifically “Professor”) than their female colleagues and that females are more likely to be addressed by first names. Moreover, they discovered that titles in the classroom tend to be associated with perceptions of higher status. Wright (2009), however, argued that not all professional titles in academia convey the same semantic connotations. In a study on the perceptions of academic titles, Wright found that both male and female college students perceived instructors who introduced themselves as “Professor” differently from those who used “Dr.” In

general, students viewed instructors who introduced themselves as “Professor” quite positively; they were assumed to be friendly and smart, and their courses were thought to be interesting and enjoyable. Students had a less favorable impression of instructors who introduced themselves as “Dr;” while they were assumed to be smart and well-educated, the assumptions made about their courses were that they would be overly tough, uninteresting, and boring. These findings suggest that professional titles in academia — and not generic titles — would likely elicit the strongest differences when it comes to the evaluation of courses.

To test this speculation, an experiment was conducted to see whether students evaluated courses differently based on the address form of the course instructor. In order to draw direct comparisons with early work on this topic, Heilman’s original methodology was replicated as closely as possible; however, adjustments were made to include the evaluation of professional titles in academia, and a more mixed participant population was used in order to see whether male and female students evaluated titles differently.

Experiment

In this experiment, participants were asked to give their impressions about potential new courses based on short syllabus descriptions. It was hypothesized that the participants would rate courses differently based on the address form used for the course instructor.

Participants

Seventy students participated in the study — half of the participants were male and half of the participants were female. The male students had a mean age of 22.6 years, and the female students had a mean age of 21.9 years. All of the students were born and raised in the United States and identified English as their first language. They were enrolled in General Education classes at a mid-sized public university and came from a wide variety of different backgrounds and majors.

Materials and methodology

The participants rated the desirability of courses based on their syllabus descriptions. Following the methodology used in Heilman’s (1975) study, ratings were made on a 9-point scale and included the factors of “Enjoyability” and “Intellectual Stimulation;” in addition, “Course Interest” (i.e., “Would you be interested in taking this course?”) was included as a third factor for the students to evaluate. The instructors for the courses were indicated immediately after the course titles on the syllabi, and there were seven variations in their address listings. The instructor was titled either Dr, Professor, Mr, Ms, Mrs, or Miss J. R. Erwin, or all titles were dispensed with and the instructor was referred to as simply J. R. Erwin.

Student participation in the survey was voluntary; however, participants were encouraged to fill out the surveys with the premise of assisting faculty in the English Department with making decisions about potential course offerings. An English Department staff assistant handed out the surveys to students in class and suggested that the students take a look at the course instructors, as well as the course content,

as some of the instructors might be familiar to them. This comment was made deliberately in order to draw attention to the presentation of the instructors' names.

After the survey was completed, the participants were then debriefed by the researcher who engaged the group in a post-study discussion of the survey topic. Anecdotal comments from this discussion were jotted down by both the researcher and a student research assistant.

Results

Responses on the ratings scales were analyzed using analysis of variance, which showed that instructor presentation had a significant effect on course ratings for all three factors — enjoyability, intellectual stimulation, and course interest. The rankings were similar for all of the factors; however, the individual scores differed, as did the effect of the students' sex on the different scores (see Table 1).

For “Enjoyability,” a two-way analysis of variance yielded a main effect for instructor presentation, $F(6,56) = 6.95, p < .001$, but not for student sex, $F(1,56) = .24, p = .63$. The interaction effect was also non-significant, $F(6,56) = 1.34, p = .26$. For this trait, syllabi with the instructor labeled as “Professor” received the highest overall rating, followed by No-Title, Mr, Dr, Ms, Miss, and Mrs.

For “Intellectual Stimulation,” a two-way analysis of variance yielded a main effect for both instructor presentation, $F(6,56) = 12.26, p < .001$, and student sex, $F(1,56) = 5.78, p < .05$, but, again, the interaction effect was non-significant, $F(6,56) = 1.06, p = .39$. For “Intellectual Stimulation,” syllabi with the instructor labeled as “Dr” received the highest overall rating, followed by Professor, No-Title, Mr, Ms, Miss, and Mrs. A post-hoc analysis of the effect for student sex indicated that ratings were significantly different only in the case of “Miss,” $t(8) = -3.67, p < .01$. Female participants rated courses taught by “Miss” higher ($M = 6, SD = .5$) than male participants ($M = 4.2, SD = .7$).

TABLE 1
MEAN RATINGS FOR ENJOYABILITY, INTELLECTUAL STIMULATION, AND COURSE INTEREST

	Dr	Prof.	Mr	Ms	Mrs	Miss	No Title
Enjoyability							
Avg. Across Courses	6.8	8.0	7.3	5.9	5.4	5.7	7.6
Avg. Male Students	6.4	7.2	7.0	6.0	5.8	5.8	8.0
Avg. Female Students	7.2	8.8	7.6	5.8	5.0	5.6	7.2
Intellectual Stimulation							
Avg. Across Courses	8.4	7.6	6.4	6.0	5.1	5.1	7.3
Avg. Male Students	8.2	7.6	5.8	5.4	5.2	4.2	7.2
Avg. Female Students	8.6	7.6	7.0	6.6	5.0	6.0	7.4
Course Interest							
Avg. Across Courses	6.5	7.9	6.1	7.1	5.4	5.1	7.6
Avg. Male Students	7.2	7.4	6.4	7.4	5.4	4.8	7.6
Avg. Female Students	5.8	8.4	5.8	6.8	5.4	5.4	7.6

For the factor of “Course Interest,” a main effect was found for instructor presentation, $F(6,56) = 3.39, p < .01$, but not for student sex, $F(1,56) = .11, p = .75$. The interaction effect was also non-significant, $F(6,56) = .48, p = .82$. Here, syllabi with the instructor labeled as “Professor” received the highest overall rating, followed by No-Title, Ms, Dr, Mr, Mrs, and Miss.

A comparison of the professional titles (i.e., Professor, Dr) with the generic titles (i.e., Mr, Ms, Mrs, Miss) revealed that professional titles were perceived more favorably. For “Enjoyability,” syllabi where instructors were labeled with professional titles received higher ratings ($M = 7.4, SD = 2.36$) than those where the instructors were labeled with generic titles ($M = 6.01, SD = 1.81$), $t(58) = 3.28, p < .01$. Similarly, professional titles received higher ratings for “Intellectual Stimulation” ($M = 8, SD = .74$) than generic titles ($M = 5.65, SD = 1.93$), $t(58) = 8.06, p < .001$; and professional titles received higher ratings for “Course Interest” ($M = 7.2, SD = 4.27$) than generic ones ($M = 5.9, SD = 3.46$), $t(58) = 2.33, p < .05$.

Professional titles, however, were not necessarily perceived equally. Results indicated that courses with the instructor labeled as “Dr” received significantly higher ratings for “Intellectual Stimulation” ($M = 8.4, SD = .49$) than those with the instructor labeled as “Professor” ($M = 7.6, SD = .71$), $t(18) = 2.31, p < .05$. On the other hand, for “Enjoyability,” courses with the instructor labeled as “Professor” ($M = 8, SD = 2.14$) received higher ratings than those with the instructor labeled as “Dr” ($M = 6.8, SD = 1.7$), $t(18) = -1.86, p < .05$. And for “Course Interest,” courses with the instructor labeled “Professor” ($M = 7.9, SD = 2.1$) also received higher ratings than those with the instructor labeled as “Dr” ($M = 6.5, SD = 5.83$), but the results were not significant, $t(18) = 1.57, p = .13$. Thus, while courses taught by instructors who label themselves as “Dr” may be considered more intellectually stimulating, courses taught by instructors who label themselves as “Professor” may be seen as more fun and, to some degree, more interesting.

Differences were also found in ratings among the generic titles. A comparison of the male title “Mr” with the female titles, “Ms,” “Mrs,” and “Miss,” revealed that students factored in the sex of the instructor when evaluating courses for both “Enjoyability” and “Intellectual Stimulation.” For “Enjoyability,” courses taught by males received significantly higher ratings ($M = 7.3, SD = .9$) than those taught by females ($M = 5.67, SD = 1.47$), $t(38) = 4.38, p < .01$. Likewise, for “Intellectual Stimulation,” courses taught by males ($M = 6.4, SD = 1.6$) were rated higher than those taught by females ($M = 5.4, SD = 1.83$), $t(38) = 2.13, p < .05$. For “Course Interest,” however, gender of the address title did not seem to be a factor in course ratings. Syllabi with the male title of address received very similar ratings ($M = 6.1, SD = 2.9$) to those with the female title of address ($M = 5.9, SD = 3.71$), $t(38) = .36, p = .72$.

In contrast to the findings from Heilman’s study, there were no statistical differences in the ratings among the female address forms for the factors of “Enjoyability,” $F(2,27) = .41, p = .67$, and “Intellectual Stimulation,” $F(2,27) = 1.53, p = .24$. However, for “Course Interest,” a factor Heilman did not include in her study, there were significant differences with Ms receiving the highest rating ($M = 7.1, SD = 2.99$), Mrs receiving the next highest evaluation ($M = 5.4, SD = 2.27$), and Miss receiving the lowest score ($M = 5.1, SD = 4.1$), $F(2, 27) = 3.73, p < .01$.

Discussion

The findings from this study verify that instructors' titles of address do influence course evaluations; however, unlike the findings from previous studies (e.g., Crawford et al., 1980; Dion, 1987; Heilman, 1975), the main differences were not found in the evaluations of Ms as compared with other female titles. Instead, the main differences were found between the professional and generic titles and also between the male and female titles of address.

Results from this investigation suggest that, in academia, professional titles are more valued than generic titles. University students perceive courses taught by an instructor labeled as "Professor" or "Dr" as more enjoyable, more stimulating, and more interesting than those taught by an instructor labeled with a generic form of address. These findings are not surprising, as professional titles by their nature encode a degree of prestige and respect: they refer specifically to one's level of education, as well as to one's position in the field. Moreover, because they are used so commonly today in academia, it seems as though their absence (particularly in a syllabus title) would actually strike students as more remarkable than their presence. This was verified by students' informal comments during the post-study discussion. Several students commented that generic titles such as "Mrs" and "Miss" seemed awkward on a college syllabus, largely because these terms were unexpected and unfamiliar in this context.

The differences in perception between the professional titles support research by Wright (2009) demonstrating that academic titles convey different semantic connotations. The fact that "Dr" was strongly associated with intellectual stimulation in both this study and in Wright's study is not unexpected, as students are likely tuning into the traditional definition of "Dr" in academia (i.e., the achievement of a doctoral degree) when making these evaluations. However, the higher ratings for "Professor" in terms of enjoyability and, to a lesser degree, course interest are more intriguing. It may be, as Wright suggested in her study, that students perceive "Professor" as being more casual since it refers to one's occupation rather than one's academic degree; thus, this might lead students to conclude that courses taught by professors are likely to be more laidback and enjoyable. Or it may be that students have a somewhat negative bias toward the use of "Dr," which can come across as being stuffy and arrogant and, to some students, even inappropriate as a title for university professors. A more thorough study looking specifically at titles of address in academia would help to clarify the different perceptions and connotations associated with these forms.

Results from this investigation also suggest that students evaluated courses differently based on the sex of the instructor. Course syllabi with the male address form (i.e., Mr) received higher ratings for intellectual stimulation and enjoyability than those with a female address form (i.e., Ms, Mrs, Miss). A large body of research has been conducted on the impact of an instructor's sex on course evaluations, and the findings in this area have been quite mixed (see Feldman, 1993 for an overview of this research). Several studies have found that female professors receive lower ratings than male professors, particularly in the ratings given by male students (Basow and Silberg, 1987; Hamermesh and Parker, 2005; Kaschak, 1978; Kierstead et al., 1988; Lombardo

and Tocci, 1979); however, numerous studies have found no significant differences in ratings of male and female instructors (Basow and Distenfeld, 1985; Basow and Howe, 1987; Bennett, 1982; Elmore and LaPointe, 1974; 1975; Freeman, 1994). Moreover, in more recent research, it has been discovered that female instructors receive higher ratings than males on a number of different traits, particularly in the ratings given by female students (Basow, 1995; Centra and Gaubatz, 2000; Tatro, 1995).

The inconsistency of this research is likely due to the fact that many different factors affect course evaluations — e.g., the type of course, the rigor of the course, the student's own major and interests, the seniority of the instructor — and that, when it comes to actual course evaluations, the sex of the instructor is only a small part of the equation. Minimally, the results from this study suggest that students at least assume that courses taught by males and females will be different. As discussed in Andersen and Miller (1997), Bennett (1982), and Sandler (1991), students likely have gender-related expectations for their instructors, where female instructors are thought to be more nurturing and supportive, while male instructors are perceived as being stronger, more intelligent, and more dynamic in the classroom. Thus, the fact that courses in this study taught by males were rated as being more stimulating and enjoyable is likely related to general perceptions that students have of their male instructors. If students had been asked to rate the courses based on their comfort with the material or the potential warmth of the environment, they very well may have given higher ratings to those taught by females.

Finally, the fact that gender of the address form did not affect course interest suggests that, even if male and female instructors are perceived differently, that does not seem to affect students' decisions about taking a particular course. These findings are consistent with those in the literature. In a study focused on student course decisions, McGoldrick and Schuhmann (2002) found that, as a whole, students did not exhibit clear preferences for either gender when facing a choice about an elective course. Instead, they were more likely to consider factors such as interest in the course topic, applicability to future career opportunities, and the time of day a course was offered.

Finally, the fact that the three female titles of address — Ms, Mrs, and Miss — were evaluated somewhat similarly suggests that connotative differences in meaning among these address forms are disappearing, as was found by Crawford et al. (1998). In fact, the only real difference among these titles was in the evaluation of "Course Interest," where courses taught by an instructor labeled as "Ms" received higher ratings than those taught by "Mrs" or "Miss," and this may simply be the result of familiarity. As noted in Atkins-Sayre (2005), on college campuses, students perceive "Ms" as the standard choice for women. Similarly, Wright (2009) found that college students perceived "Ms" as more appropriate for their college instructors than "Mrs" or "Miss," which they associated with elementary and secondary school teachers. Thus, when making a decision about whether or not they were actually interested in taking a particular course, students in this study may have simply relied on what they recognized and found to be most typical.

In sum, the findings from this study suggest that titles really do matter in academia. College students are predisposed to certain attitudes about a course merely by the ways in which the instructors present themselves. For general scholars of names, this raises another interesting avenue for research in the field of onomastics; just as names

convey a considerable amount of information about an individual, the title one uses to accompany his or her name also conveys a considerable amount of information. Furthermore, for those of us in academia, these findings touch particularly close to home. Nowadays, students are more involved than ever when it comes to making their own decisions about the courses they take. And, for many of us, one of the first ways we interact with our students is through our course descriptions. At my home institution, for example, instructors are now required to post course syllabi online weeks in advance, so that the students have the opportunity to peruse syllabi and find the courses that are the best fit for them. We would like to assume that “best fit” involves a thorough examination of our course content and the required reading materials; however, this study suggests that student evaluations go beyond that. In part, students are focusing on the very ways in which we as instructors present ourselves.

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