Ich and 'I': A Cultural Contrastive Analysis of First-person Subject Pronouns in German and English Writings

Kirsten M. Christensen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol14/iss1/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
The interest to do this study stems from a German composition class I had as an undergraduate at Arizona State University. The professor of that class strove to not only strengthen our command of German grammar and vocabulary, but also to help us understand German writing style. One aspect he particularly stressed was avoidance of the pronoun ich ('I') in sentence-initial position in our essays. He taught us that Germans greatly down-play the first person in their writings. I had been similarly instructed to avoid first person in a high school English writing class, but only in reference to persuasive essays. I sensed a difference in the reasons for avoidance in the two languages. With nothing documented to back it up, it simply seemed to me that the reason I was taught to avoid first person in English was for strictly stylistic purposes. The reasons for avoiding it in German, on the other hand, seemed more bound to the actual mentality and culture of the German-speaking people. In other words, the de-emphasis of first person in German seemed much more than just a learned writing skill: it seemed to me to be a reflection of the entire German mentality.

Gustave Le Bon, (1960:27) a French sociologist, made the following statement at the end of the nineteenth century:

> The most striking peculiarity presented by a psychological crowd is the following: Whoever be the individuals that compose it, however like or unlike be their mode of life, their occupations, their character, or their intelligence, the fact that they have been transformed into a crowd puts them in possession of a sort of collective mind...There are certain ideas and feelings which do not come into being, or do not transform themselves into acts except in the case of individuals forming a crowd.

Dr. Sigmund Freud, (1921:6,7) commenting on Le Bon's work stated, "When individuals in a mass are bound into a unit, there must then be something which binds them together, and this means of binding could be just that which is characteristic for the mass."
What is this 'something' which binds the mass of native German-speaking individuals together? What kind of 'collective mind' do they possess which might reflect in their written language? To answer these questions and to better understand the attitude towards the first person among German speakers, a look into the history of Germany, Austria and Switzerland will shed some light.

Though much can be learned from a look far back in time, reflecting only as far back as World War I is extremely revealing in regards to the forming of the 'collective mind' found in modern-day German speakers.

Both World War I and World War II were devastatingly destructive for Germany. Even years after World War I, its effects were still felt by those who had lived through it, as illustrated by the following words as quoted by Whalen, (1984:181-182) taken from the opening address of the fifth annual convention of the Reichsverband in Berlin, delivered by Willibald Hanner, a disabled veteran from Saxony, on July 30, 1930, a dozen years after the close of the war:

We know and feel that the war didn't only have external effects. It did not just change the map of the world, it changed the soul of human beings. We ourselves cannot entirely sense the enormous impact of the war on the human spirit, because we were part of it...we who have lived through this inferno can never be free from it. It has affected all our lives...A gash goes through all our lives, and that gash is the war. With a brutal hand it has torn our lives in two...

Whalen (1984:182) observes that there was, in Hanner's speech, a complete absence of the heroic ideal which had reigned in Germany at the war's commencement in 1914 and that this ideal had been replaced by melancholia. A loss of ich identity and worth was evident, or perhaps better stated, a loss of wir ('we,' or group unity) and, as discussed by Freud and Le Bon, this lack of wir was displayed as a group of individuals lacking ich.

Whalen, (1984:183) quotes a speech given by President Seims of the Volksbund in 1927 to proclaim a German memorial day further discloses the collective soul which existed among the Germans following World War I:
A point must be found somewhere in the German people, where unity of our torn people can be achieved... Such a point can never be found in politics, or in religion, or in economic or social or artistic relationships. Shouldn't it be possible to unite the German people...? Germany must live!

Again, the unity into which the Germans were bound at that point was weakened and torn and though the need to restore strength was clear to the individuals comprising that unit, the way to go about it was not clear.

Mallinckrodt, in discussing the foreign propaganda during the first World War, states the belief of many post-war German observers that such propaganda contributed to the German defeat, most particularly "...through softening of the morale on the homefront." (Mallinckrodt 1980:23) This is another example of the circle effect of lack of ich and subsequent lack of wir, and vice versa.

Skipping several years to the onset of the reign of the Third Reich shows a major change in the mass spirit among the Germans as Hitler was able to do for them what no other had up to that point, namely, to pull the country's economics, and thus the citizens' spirits out of the despair in which they had wallowed. Germany once again, after years without it, possessed a very powerful wir and thus her citizens could each possess an ich.

Unfortunately, this national identity was linked to the power, charisma and promises, some fulfilled, others not, of one man, Adolf Hitler. With the infamous turn of events in Stalingrad, London, Normandy and other key cities, this one man's powerful reich was destroyed, and he destroyed himself in an ultimate act of ich cowardice, suicide.

That the nation he left behind should be devoid of wir and ich identity is clear. Patriotism was pulled out from under Germany's feet and thrown in her face.

Austria and Switzerland too, though not as devastated as Germany, also suffered losses and faced restructuring and re-alignment at war's end.

Both world wars were perhaps the greatest factors in the last century affecting the ich of the German-speaking peoples. How did these same wars affect America? Much can be said, but let it suffice in this context to mention only a few factors. First, America, though heavily involved in both wars, experienced no combat on her own soil. (Pearl Harbor excepted.) In addition, America was victorious in both wars and thus emerged from each war able to move forward
with a strong sense of national \textit{wir}. America was becoming a super power and her citizens, basking in the strength of their motherland, were thus able to move forward individually with a strong sense of \textit{ich}.

The two world wars were likely the most powerful influence on the modern-day \textit{Massenseele} or 'group mind/soul' of America and the German-speaking nations. Certainly though, other factors, both cultural and linguistic, affect and/or reflect in this \textit{Seele} as well. A few of these possible factors sharpen the American/German contrast:

- \textit{ich} is capitalized only in sentence initial position.
- 'I' is always capitalized.
- All second person pronouns are capitalized in personal letters in German, thus emphasizing the recipient and de-emphasizing the \textit{ich}.
- Subject-verb-object is the prevalent word order in English sentences. This is not so in German, which allows great variance in word order. For example, that which one wishes to emphasize in a sentence, or the "goalword," as Mackensen calls it (1964:142) is normally placed at the end of the sentence, but can also be placed in sentence-initial position. The following German sentences, for example, are all correct possibilities, depending on what the speaker wishes to emphasize;

  \begin{itemize}
  \item Ich gehe heute zum Geschäft. (lit: I go today to the store.)
  \item Heute gehe ich zum Geschäft. (lit: Today go I to the store.)
  \item Zum Geschäft gehe ich heute. (lit: To the store go I today.)
  \end{itemize}

Mackensen, in his handbook written for native German speakers, discusses the correct writing style and form of many different items, e.g. reports of events, (personal and professional) essays, letters, etc. Some interesting information relating to the use of first person in German writing can be found therein.

In a given example of a personal journal entry, first person pronouns are entirely missing. (Mackensen 1964:134)

In listing basic rules for the letter writer, Mackensen (1964:157) includes this: "Transfer yourself into the situation of the receiver." He continues, "That is difficult for most people, since they are bound up in their 'I.'"
In another section listing rules for the report writer, he states, "Describe only facts... The sequence of the event should be laid fast, and nothing more. Therefore, personal feelings and the opinion of the author should have no place in the report." (Mackensen 1964: 255)

Similarly, Neuse, (1962: 23, 24) in his style/form book for non-native students of German, includes an entire section of examples and practice entitled "Impersonal Means of Expression" and names as the second rule of thumb for German style the following: "Germans have a preference for impersonal means of expression. (Subject - it, one, inanimate subject) English prefers a personal subject." Some examples he includes from German are the following: Was mich angeht, 'where I am concerned...' (was, 'what' is the subject here) Es ist mir kalt, 'I'm cold.' (es, 'it' is the subject in this sentence.)

I casually interviewed several native German speakers, both students and professors, and asked them what they had been taught in school in regards to first person. They all said they could not remember when they had been explicitly instructed to avoid ich, but just recalled growing up knowing that avoidance was expected.

With such historical and linguistic evidences regarding German and English as background, the forming of the following hypothesis emerges, namely: when given the same writing assignment, native German speakers and Americans will react differently in regards to first-person pronouns, with Germans avoiding ich in both sentence-initial position and throughout the writing more than Americans will avoid the use of 'I' in the same contexts. It is further hypothesized that this use of first person is a culturally-rather than linguistically-bound phenomenon. In other words, Germans will show greater avoidance of first person in both German and English and Americans will show greater use of first person in both languages than Germans. The following study was designed to test this hypothesis.

THE SUBJECTS

Five native German speakers and five native Americans were the subjects for this study. They ranged in age from early twenties to early thirties.

The native German speakers, (Group 1) all college students, are from the following countries: two from West Germany, one from Austria and two from Switzerland. All of them had been in the United States from one to six years and all of them speak fluent English. There were four women and one man.
The native Americans, (Group 2) also all college students, had all had varying degrees of German instruction as well as target environment exposure. All five had served as missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints either in West Germany or Austria for periods ranging from 16 to 22 months. In addition, three of them had other study and/or living experience in Germany or Austria. All speak with native or near-native fluency in German. There were three men and two women.

THE STUDY

Each of the ten subjects was asked to write two short compositions, one in English and one in German. The topics assigned to them were as follows: 1) "My most embarrassing experience," (in German) and 2) "My plans for the next five years." (in English) One of the German natives switched the topics and languages around, writing about his embarrassing experience in English and about his five-year plans in German. The effect this variable may have had on the data was not considered in this study.

The subjects were allowed to write the compositions unsupervised on their own time, but were given the following general guidelines: 1) to write spontaneously as their thoughts on the subject came to them, i.e. no rough draft and final copy, and 2) to make it no longer than one side of one page. Typed or hand-written was not specified, which resulted in great variance in composition length. How this variance was worked with will be discussed later.

Though most of the subjects asked, they were not told what the purpose of the study was, nor what I would be looking for in their writing. This was, naturally, to avoid influencing their writing.

Once the compositions were turned over to me they were first analyzed for two features: 1) Average number of T-units per composition and 2) average number of words per T-unit. A T-unit is a minimal-terminal unit and is a means devised by grammarians to standardize the measuring of sentences. A simple yet clear example of how a T-unit and a sentence may differ is the well-known sentence, "I came, I saw, I conquered." This string of words, though only comprising one sentence, makes up three T-units, since three separate and complete thoughts are represented.

These T-unit figures eliminate problems associated with varied composition length and provide a basis against which to measure the use of first person in the compositions. Whenever the term 'first-person pronouns' is used in this study it shall refer only to first-person singular, nominative pronouns in both German and English, i.e. ich and 'I.'
For use in reference to the tables, Group IG refers to German natives writing in their L1, Group IE refers to the same individuals' writings in their L2, English. Group 2G is the native Americans and their writings in their L2, German and Group 2E is the Americans and their writings in their L1.

Table A: Average # T-units and average T-unit length

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Average # T-units</th>
<th>Average T-unit length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IG</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>10.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>11.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2G</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>11.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>18.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each group of writings was then analyzed in regards to the use of the first-person pronouns. Due to the limited scope of this pilot study, only three major aspects were examined: 1) percentage of first-person pronouns to total words, 2) fronting of ich or 'I,' and 3) total use of the same pronouns.

The data regarding the percentage of first-person pronouns to total words, as seen in table B, is not significantly revealing, with percentages ranging from four to six percent, among all four groups. Somewhat surprising and unsupportive of the hypothesis is the fact that the native Germans writing in their LI showed the highest percentage of first-person pronouns, though a mere one percent higher than the Americans writing in their L1.

Table B: Percentage of first-person pronouns to total words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IG</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2G</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next two items analyzed show substantial contrasts between the groups. In looking at the percentage of total sentences fronted by ich or 'I,' (see Table C) a significant fourteen percent difference appears between native Germans writing German (IG) and native Americans writing English (2E). This is in strong support of the hypothesis.

It should be noted that the units analyzed in Table C are actual sentences and not T-units since a pronoun appearing at the front of a T-unit is not necessarily at the front of a sentence.
Interestingly, both groups 1 and 2 greatly increased the fronting of first-person pronouns when writing in their respective L2, with a two percent increase for the Americans and a large eleven percent increase for the Germans. This can probably be attributed to the fact that for both groups, concentration when writing in their L2 was on form rather than style, and that each individual, in his/her L1 is able to more easily concentrate on style, including use of first person. This shows, in contrast to the hypothesis, that the control of first person is, to an extent, linguistically bound.

Significant also in Table C is the fact that the Americans' overall percentage of fronting is higher than for the Germans, indicating an expected lack of concern with the use of first person, though this is not to be judged as negative or positive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage of sentences fronted by first-person pronoun</th>
<th>Percentage fronted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IG</td>
<td></td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td></td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2G</td>
<td></td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E</td>
<td></td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, of the total first-person pronouns used in the compositions, the percentage of these pronouns appearing in sentence-initial position was analyzed. (see Table D) This analysis provides the most striking and hypothesis-supporting data of all.

The Germans writing in German fronted a mere eleven percent of their total pronouns while the Americans writing in English fronted twenty-eight percent.

Both groups show an almost identical increase in fronted pronouns when writing in their L2. For the Germans, this increase was fourteen percent, from eleven to twenty-five percent and for the Americans, a fifteen percent increase, from twenty-eight to forty-three percent. This is likely due, as discussed in regards to Table C, to the fact that the concentration in the L2 for both groups is on form rather than style, particularly since they were asked to write spontaneously. This, again, is evidence that the use of first person is somewhat linguistically bound.

That Group 2, the Americans, shows a significantly higher overall fronting of first-person pronouns, (seventeen percent higher than the Germans when writing in the L1 and eighteen percent higher than Germans when writing in the L2) again supports the hypothesis that German speakers
avoid the use of first person better than Americans and that it is greatly culturally bound.

Table D: Percentage of total first-person pronouns appearing in sentence-initial position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1G</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1E</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2G</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2E</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

As stated previously, the scope of this study is small and great potential exists for expansion. Conclusions more definite or concrete than those already laid out in the body of this study should not be made until a study of greater magnitude, with many more subjects is performed.

Additional items in an extended study might include a look at first-person plural pronouns, (wir, uns, 'we,' 'us') as well as at first-person object pronouns. (mich, mir, 'me') The following variables, namely the age and gender of subjects as well as the specific language background of each subject, particularly time spent in the target language environment, could add important insight. Also interesting would be a study of first person use in spoken language.

Applications for Language Teachers

Since this study concentrates on writing, its results will probably be of most help to college teachers at the third semester level and above, and for teachers of second, third and fourth year high school students. A difference in the use of first person between German and English is here evident, despite the small nature of the study. If this aspect of the language is, in fact, one which is bound to the culture and mentality of the peoples involved, teachers, especially those of GSL, should make an understanding of this mentality an integral part of writing instruction, hand in hand with spelling and grammar, just as language and culture are interwoven, inseparable and hand in hand.
References


