

Article

Unlocking the Power of *Oom* and *Tannie*: How Forms of Address Shape Perception and Respect in Afrikaans

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Abstract: Although some research on forms of address toward adults in the South African context has been conducted in the past, there remains a gap regarding the use of *oom* and *tannie* as a specific informal Afrikaans form of address. This study comprises both a review of the existing literature and an empirical investigation to address this gap. A mixed-methods approach was used to conduct the empirical investigation. Quantitative data were collected through electronic questionnaires completed by adults and learners. Qualitative data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews. Analysis of the data indicated that the use of *oom* and *tannie* is still prevalent in the Afrikaans-speaking community, demonstrating a high frequency of use. From the data, it becomes evident that age, respect, familiarity, social class, and status serve as determining factors in the use of *oom* and *tannie*. The age difference between speaker and addressee that serves as the accepted norm for using *oom* and *tannie* remains ten years or more. It seems that the Afrikaans community is moving toward a more informal and solidary society, with *oom* and *tannie* or *first names* being preferred over the use of titles. Without a doubt, *oom* and *tannie* are used in the Afrikaans community as alternative forms of respect.

Keywords: forms of address; Afrikaans; *oom*; *tannie*; sociolinguistics; respect; age; norms



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1. Introduction

The use of forms of address and salutations is one of the most important ways in which verbal communication between interlocutors is initiated. Although forms of address are important in all linguistic communities and cultures, they are often specific to different cultures and the unique ways in which they are used (Ellis 2022, p. 1). Forms of address are closely linked to various aspects of human interaction, such as social power and distance. Since language use is often influenced by culturally determined social interactions, the conforming forms of address will, therefore, be used in different ways in different cultures. The use of any given form of address—or lack thereof—is subject to several variables, which usually indicate something about the addressee, the speaker, the contextual formality of the situation, and the type of social interaction among interlocutors (Combrink 1987, p. 15). These variables include age, familiarity, status, sex, and so on.

Although extensive research exists in the international context, the focus and research on forms of address in South Africa have been more limited. Most of the studies focusing on Afrikaans forms of address were published between 1963 and 1989 and later in 2015 and 2019. The first comprehensive study focusing specifically on *oom* and *tannie* was completed in 2022. It provided contemporary insights into a unique phenomenon and addressed the gap in the existing literature on Afrikaans forms of address, specifically the informal *oom* and *tannie* (Ellis 2022, p. 363). From a diachronic perspective, the study provides a reference point for future research on these forms of address, which will help to determine the extent to which Afrikaans forms of address might change. It also offers a data baseline for future real-time sociolinguistic studies exploring similar issues (Ellis 2022, p. 363).¹

Afrikaans is one of the 12 official languages of South Africa. With historical influences from Germanic, various Asian, and indigenous languages, its forms of address reveal intricate layers of respect, familiarity, and hierarchical dynamics (See Scholtz 1963; Carstens and Le Cordeur 2016; Carstens and Raidt 2017, 2019). The data, analysis, and conclusions presented in this paper result from research conducted² on Afrikaans forms of address with a focus on the contemporary use of and norms related to *oom* (English “uncle”; German “Onkel”) and *tannie* (English “aunt”; German “Tante”) as *informal* forms of address. The primary aim of this comprehensive study was to determine how prevalent the use of these forms of address was (circa 2021), whether a prescriptive norm for their use exists within the Afrikaans-speaking community, and to determine whether Afrikaans speakers have an overall positive or negative attitude toward the use of these terms (Ellis 2022, p. 7).

The 2022 Census indicated that the population of South Africa consisted of 62 million people (Stats SA 2022, p. 22), of which only 10.6% of speakers use Afrikaans as a mother tongue. The country is culturally diverse, and Afrikaans is the third most spoken language after IsiZulu (24.4%) and IsiXhosa (16.3%). English is the fifth most spoken language, with 8.7% of the population using it as a first language (Stats SA 2022, p. 22).

The approach taken in this comprehensive study focused on several variables with a high probability of influencing the choice of address form: age, sex (biological category), social class and status, situation, race, family relationship, education and occupation, and familiarity between interlocutors (Ellis 2022, p. 173). For the purposes of *this* article, however, the focus has been narrowed to consider only age and sex as variables since the data gathered within the broader scope of the original project indicated that these variables were the most definitive for the choice of *oom* and *tannie*.

Previous studies on Afrikaans forms of address have been undertaken from sociolinguistic perspectives (Odendal 1976; Wybenga 1981; Kotzé 1983; Bosman and Otto 2015; Hoffmann 2019; Ellis 2022), pragmatic perspectives (Combrink 1987; Kotzé 1987; Wybenga 1987; Hoffmann 2019), and historical perspectives (Scholtz 1963; Swanepoel 1989). For this study, a sociolinguistic perspective was used to address existing gaps in this tradition. This approach was supplemented by pragmatic references, as these two fields cannot function in isolation, especially when describing and analyzing forms of address. In this regard, respect (holding someone in high esteem), politeness (practicing good manners), and implicature as pragmatic determinants were taken into account.³ Based on these two approaches, the objective of the argument presented here is to explore how Afrikaans *speakers* perceive the general use of the informal *oom* and *tannie* (as old-fashioned, polite, comfortable, and/or informal), as well as how *being addressed* in this manner may elicit feelings of belittlement and/or being classified as old.

With this paper, I intend to concretize the phenomenon of *oom* and *tannie* by situating these forms of address within the larger Afrikaans language community. This study comprises three parts: first, a description of norms and conventions within the Afrikaans language community is presented, specifically focusing on how they have been described and analyzed in previous studies. The second part of the article presents data from my research, focusing on several variables. The last section offers concluding remarks, highlighting limitations and possible future endeavors.

1.1. Norms and Social Conventions in Afrikaans

As Brown and Gilman (1960, p. 271) state, children are instructed on what to say as they grow up, which includes familiarity with conventions such as the use of forms of address conveyed during childhood (Wybenga 1981, p. 9). The language community in which one grows up plays an important role in acquiring social and cultural values. The norms related to the community refer to the linguistic and social guidelines within the community, which are usually prescriptive in nature. If these rules are violated, it leads to potentially uncomfortable situations for both interlocutors (Ellis 2022, p. 32). Since language is transferred from one generation to the next, the use of language and certain forms of address reflect the traditions of the language and its speakers (Carstens and Raidt

2017, p. 84). In the Afrikaans language community, the use of *oom* and *tannie* is quite a common occurrence, and children are (still) expected to use them. Even though these are common forms of address, one could ask whether this should be considered as a norm or rather as a convention (Ellis 2022, p. 37). Even though these terms are often (wrongly) used interchangeably, norms are normative or prescriptive in nature, whereas conventions are not. As this study mainly focuses on the sociolinguistic aspects of forms of address, the focus, therefore, is on the sociolinguistic nature of linguistic norms and social conventions within the Afrikaans community (Ellis 2022, p. 31).

1.2. Symmetry and Asymmetry in Forms of Address

For any research on forms of address, the seminal work conducted by Brown and Gilman (1960) about second-person pronouns remains an important point of reference. They focused on the asymmetric power relations expressed by using these pronouns, e.g., the formal V form (*you, vous, Sie*) and the informal T form (*you, tu, du*) (Brown and Gilman 1960, pp. 253–54). They emphasized the influence of two constructs on social relationships, namely power and solidarity, and how this relationship is expressed by means of address forms and/or pronouns (Brown and Gilman 1960, p. 253). According to them, the nature of power is non-reciprocal, and consequently, any power relationship is established by the choice and use of the form of address: the person with more power gives T and receives V (thus asymmetrical), and vice versa (Brown and Gilman 1960, p. 255). The contrast to power is solidarity, which refers to the feeling of unity between people within the same community—both speakers, by using the reciprocal T (or V), establish a symmetrical relationship (Brown and Gilman 1960, p. 258; Ellis 2022, p. 64).

According to this distinction, the use of *oom* and *tannie* is asymmetrical because as a general rule, an older person will be addressed as such but will not address a younger person in this way (Ellis 2022, p. 6). When changes occur in communities, also regarding forms of address, they will change from being more formal (V) to being more informal (T), thus becoming more symmetrical (See Brown and Gilman 1960; Marais 1979; Isosävi and Lappalainen 2015; Waterlot 2017; Vismans 2016; Formentelli and Hajek 2013). Considering the abovementioned, one might infer that using *oom* and *tannie* indicates a need within the Afrikaans community to establish more solidarity between interlocutors. This is achieved by addressing persons older than oneself using *oom* and *tannie*, though with the features associated with the T form (solidarity, informality) replacing the conventional formal V features. However, some members in the community do not want to accept this change from a more formal community to a community with more solidarity and, therefore, reject the use of *oom* and *tannie* (Ellis 2022, p. 6).

Forty years ago, Odendal (1976, p. 107) predicted that the use of *oom* and *tannie* would decline based on the results of his research. However, Wybenga (1981, p. 111) was more positive regarding these forms and suggested that the use of *tannie* will increase and that this has already been the case since the 1950s (Ellis 2022, p. 6). The data analysis enables me to determine, statistically, whether the use of *oom* and *tannie* has declined or increased.

1.3. The Unique Situation of Afrikaans

Afrikaans, similar to German and Dutch, forms part of the Germanic language family and distinguishes between the formal *u* (*vous, Sie*) and informal *ij* (*tu, du*) pronouns. But there is a difference from these languages regarding their respective uses of familial terms (Ellis 2022, p. 17). Unlike German and Dutch (where *Onkel/Oom* and *Tante* are used for family members, very close family friends, or as terms of endearment and then always with a first name), in Afrikaans, *oom* and *tannie* can be used toward any (older) person, and then with or without using a first name (Spillner 2014, p. 179; De Wachter 2017; Odendal 1976, p. 108; Ellis 2022, p. 21). In the Afrikaans community, and especially amongst younger people, the default form of address seems to be *oom* and *tannie*. It mainly functions as a convenient and relatively safe form of address if a speaker is uncertain about the

appropriate form to use. It provides comfort because the speaker still shows respect, even though it may not be the most suitable address in a particular situation.

As a rule of thumb, only persons ten years and older than the speaker should be addressed as *oom* and *tannie* (Odendal 1976, p. 109; Ellis 2022, p. 43). In a comprehensive study, it was found that speakers use *oom* and *tannie* for the following reasons: *because they were taught that way; to show respect; because someone is 20+ years older than them; because they do not know how to address someone; it feels acceptable or adequate in the situation; and because formal forms of address make them uncomfortable* (Ellis 2022, p. 184). Even though it appears to be a common form of address, some people within the Afrikaans community still find it irritating, unprofessional, too familiar, and so on. (Ellis 2022, p. 2).

1.4. Retracing Oom and Tannie: A Linguistic Overview

As studies in Afrikaans linguistics that analyze forms of address are limited, addressing this language phenomenon in the current context becomes even more pertinent. A brief overview of the research conducted thus far in the context of Afrikaans follows. This overview provides the background for my research as it illustrates what has been done so far and what has not yet been addressed in the Afrikaans context.

The first study to explore Afrikaans forms of address was that of Scholtz (1963, in Ellis 2022, pp. 82–83; Bosman and Otto 2015, p. 366), in which he discussed the historical development of Afrikaans from Dutch, with specific reference to how and when Dutch linguistic forms changed in (South) Africa.⁴ He provides an overview of the pronouns *u* (you formal), *ji* (you informal), and *julle* (you plural). As becomes clear from his overview, already during the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, *oom* and *tannie* were used to address family members, but these terms were also used as a polite form in the South African countryside (Scholtz 1963, p. 67).

In 1976, Odendal undertook a small, qualitative, and introductory study amongst students, in which he focused on maturity as a variable (i.e., whether the person is perceived as an adult or not). The intention was to establish how this variable influenced the choice of form of address in several contexts. The results indicated that a young(er) person would be addressed by their first name and *you* (informal), whereas an adult would be addressed by their title and *u* (formal) (Odendal 1976, p. 107). He provided a model for Afrikaans forms of address based on Ervin-Tripp's (1973) model established for the American address system. With this model, he attempted to provide a general description of the variables that influenced the choice of address in Afrikaans (Odendal 1976, p. 105). An interesting result from his research indicated that the forms *oom* and *tannie* could be used toward *any* person deemed *aansienlik ouer* ("considerably older") than the speaker (Odendal 1976, p. 107).

Marais (1979) conducted an empirical study to determine the extent to which power and solidarity correlated with the use of *u* (formal) and *ji* (informal) between interlocutors in Afrikaans (Ellis 2022, p. 104). A total of 225 first-year students participated, and the results of this study indicated that the use of the formal *u* signified higher levels of power, whereas the use of the informal *ji* indicated an increased feeling of solidarity between speaker and addressee (Marais 1979, p. 273).⁵

In 1981, Wybenga published a comprehensive mixed-methods study conducted amongst white Afrikaans speakers in Vanderbijlpark, an industrial city located south of Johannesburg. His goal was to investigate the correlation between Afrikaans forms of address and the role of status and status-related issues, focusing specifically on pronouns and vocatives (Wybenga 1981, p. 12; Bosman and Otto 2015, p. 368). Wybenga (1981, p. 1) claimed that using pronouns in Afrikaans was insufficient to indicate the level of power or solidarity between interlocutors. According to him, it was true that the pronouns *ji* and *u* provide a general indication regarding the social distance between interlocutors, but the use of a vocative (*meneer, Piet; oom, tannie*) would give a more accurate indication (Wybenga 1981, p. 2). One aspect that hampered the study was the participants' unwillingness to share their ages. The issue of age being a sensitive matter during data collection will be returned to later.

Kotzé (1983) concluded a systematic investigation into how respective relationships were conveyed using different forms of address in (Cape) Malay Afrikaans (Ellis 2022, p. 104; Bosman and Otto 2015, p. 370). He focused on the importance of the hierarchical structures within this community and provided a model for the referential address system within the Cape Malay community (Kotzé 1983, pp. 197, 199).

The next study pertaining to the Afrikaans forms of address is that of Combrink, concluded in 1987, in which he analyzed the purpose or usefulness of the vocative in Afrikaans and aimed to illustrate how different types of address forms can be used in different imaginary situations (Ellis 2022, p. 94). He distinguished between vocatives pertaining to first and last names and subsequently illustrated the effect or implications of the choice of these during interactions (Combrink 1987, p. 17). According to Combrink (1987, p. 30), the person with greater power or higher status may omit the vocative in cases where the addressee has less power, which is deemed neither polite nor impolite. However, if the roles are reversed, this is considered impolite in Afrikaans (Combrink 1987, p. 30).

In 1989, Swanepoel set out to determine, using a text-based investigation, how forms of address between people from different ethnic backgrounds had changed between 1652 and 1988. She focused specifically on the interethnic forms of address between white-to-nonwhite, nonwhite-to-nonwhite, nonwhite-to-white, and white-to-white interlocutors, as well as the use of racial pejoratives (Swanepoel 1989, p. 1).⁶ Swanepoel's results indicated that certain pejoratives had not changed between 1652 and 1988, whereas the choice of address form had changed, or its occurrences had declined (Ellis 2022, p. 98). She concluded that there are definite normative or social mechanisms at play that determine the changes found in the use of interethnic forms of address in Afrikaans (Swanepoel 1989, p. 129).

The next study to examine Afrikaans forms of address followed only 25 years later: Bosman and Otto (2015, p. 361) undertook a quantitative pilot study amongst the Afrikaans-speaking communities in South Africa and Namibia to assess the contemporary use of the informal and formal second-person pronouns *ji* and *u*. One of the focal points of the research was to determine the current perceptions regarding these pronouns and whether their use had changed since the 1980s (Bosman and Otto 2015, p. 362).⁷

The results indicated that 61% of the participants, especially the younger cohorts, preferred not to be addressed with the formal *u* (Bosman and Otto 2015, p. 385). A section specifically focusing on the participants' perceptions regarding their use of the formal *u* was included. Participants were given three statements, namely *I perceive u as very formal*, *I perceive u as very old-fashioned*, and *I perceive u as very polite* (Bosman and Otto 2015, p. 386). The majority of the participants indicated that they either agreed or were neutral toward the first question (Bosman and Otto 2015, p. 386). Regarding the use of *u* being old-fashioned, most of the participants indicated that they were neutral or that they disagreed. With the last question in mind, 79% of the participants agreed that *u* is a very polite form of address to use (Bosman and Otto 2015, p. 386).

The first small-scale study that focused on *oom* and *tannie* was conducted by Hoffmann (2019). She investigated the use, experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of buyers and sellers at two marketplaces in the Pretoria area, one being a *boeremark* (farmers market) and the other a *Banting and Keto Lifestyle* market. In essence, Hoffmann (2019, p. 86) claims that the visitors to these two markets are conspicuously different from one another. She states that the Banting lifestyle completely diverts from a traditional Afrikaans lifestyle: participants from the former describe their lifestyle as being alternative, with them entertaining modern opinions and attitudes, whereas participants from the latter describe their lifestyle, opinions, attitudes, and values as being more traditional (Hoffmann 2019, pp. 123–24).

A mixed-method study follows, with questionnaires, interviews, and observations employed for data collection (Hoffmann 2019, p. 8). With a focus on both sociolinguistics and pragmatics, she aims to determine whether the forms *oom* and *tannie* are (still) used by the participants and what their perceptions of and attitudes toward these forms of address are (Hoffmann 2019, p. 119).

The results show that *oom* and *tannie* are still used in the Pretoria area and the attitudes towards using these forms are predominantly positive (Hoffmann 2019, p. 128). The participants stated furthermore that the use of *oom* and *tannie* has changed since they were young (Hoffmann 2019, p. 128). Most of the participants indicated that *oom* and *tannie* are currently being used less than before and that people generally prefer to use the informal *jy* and *jou* (“your”) (Hoffmann 2019, p. 126). Even though Hoffmann (2019, p. 131) states that no generalizations can be made due to the small scale of the study, some delineable patterns regarding the use, experience, and perceptions of and attitudes towards the forms *oom* and *tannie* can be seen in her results (Ellis 2022, p. 103).

This overview of all the studies on Afrikaans forms of address indicates several gaps that should be addressed: most of the studies did not explicitly focus on *oom* and *tannie*, are already considered outdated, were conducted on a small scale, or were limited in terms of variables such as race. This forms the background for the large-scale research project that was concluded in 2022, in which an attempt was made not only to include more variables but also to use social media as an additional data instrument.

2. Materials and Methods

The first comprehensive study in Afrikaans to focus on the current use of *oom* and *tannie* adopted an empirical approach with a mixed-methods design for data collection. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, social media, observation, and focus group conversations, making this the first research on forms of address in Afrikaans to include all these instruments. For the purposes of this article, however, only data obtained from questionnaires and interviews will be presented in assorted tables relative to age as a distinctive variable. The questionnaire aimed to establish a norm within the Afrikaans language community, with its format at least partly based on the (Afrikaans) research instruments developed by Odendal (1976), Combrink (1987), and Bosman and Otto (2015). An additional purpose of the questionnaire was to determine the frequency of use of *oom* and *tannie*, as well as the extent to which participants agreed (or disagreed) with several different statements (Ellis 2022, p. 141). Regarding each of the questions and its discussion below, a brief mention will be made as to how the data can be presented in terms of sex, as some instances were statistically significant.

Two questionnaires were utilized in the study—one for adult participants (18 years and older) and one for children (ages 12–15 years). The adult questionnaire comprised 55 multiple-choice items (closed questions), whereas the children’s questionnaire consisted of 33 items. Like the former, the latter questionnaire also used a multiple-choice format and the same questions; however, questions deemed irrelevant to children were omitted, and the language was simplified (Ellis 2022, p. 142). Both nominal and ordinal variables were included in the questionnaires, and a Chi-Square test was applied per question to determine whether there is a correlation between two items, e.g., age and the use of *oom* and *tannie* (Ellis 2022, p. 173). Each question was compared in terms of six variables, namely gender, race, occupation, qualification, age, and area.

The data are presented here in terms of the following age cohorts: children (12–15 years), young adults (18–25 years), and then adults of 30–39 years, 40–49 years, 50–59 years, 60–69 years and 70–89 years, respectively. The first language of all the participants was Afrikaans, and they were recruited from two areas, namely Bloemfontein in the Free State province, and George in the Western Cape (Ellis 2022, p. 149). Afrikaans is spoken in both regions.

A total of 2697 questionnaires were initially completed, but ultimately, only 2435 were used. All participants who were not mother-tongue Afrikaans speakers and those living outside the focus areas were excluded ($n = 262$) (Ellis 2022, p. 149). In the following section, the data are presented in terms of the responses received per question.

3. Results

3.1. Questionnaire

The first question (Table 1) set out to determine whether the participants view the use of *oom* and *tannie* as old-fashioned. This question was directed at the total number of participants (n = 2432). Age was indicated as a statistically significant variable ($p = 0$).

Table 1. *Oom* and *tannie* are old-fashioned (Ellis 2022, pp. 222–23).

	12–15	16–24	25–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–89
I strongly agree	87 (4.5%)	5 (1.6%)	1 (3.8%)	2 (3.4%)	2 (4.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
I agree	184 (9.6%)	17 (5.3%)	1 (3.8%)	8 (13.8%)	8 (18.2%)	7 (14.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
I disagree	832 (43.4%)	126 (39.5%)	17 (65.4%)	32 (55.2%)	24 (54.5%)	33 (68.8%)	15 (88.2%)	0 (0%)
I strongly disagree	816 (42.5%)	171 (53.6%)	7 (26.9%)	16 (27.6%)	10 (22.7%)	8 (16.7%)	2 (11.8%)	0 (0%)
Total	1919	319	26	58	44	48	17	1
2432								

The different age cohorts indicated that, without a doubt, they do *not* think that the forms *oom* and *tannie* are old-fashioned. Interestingly, the 16–24 years cohort felt most strongly that these terms do not represent an old-fashioned form of address (Ellis 2022, p. 223).

In terms of sex, the majority of female (88.0%) and male (85.2%) participants indicated that they disagree that the forms of address *oom* and *tannie* are old-fashioned (Ellis 2022, p. 218). Even though this variable was not statistically significant ($p = 0.246$), it is clear that neither males nor females perceive the forms *oom* and *tannie* to be old-fashioned (Ellis 2022, p. 218).

The following two questions were used to determine whether the participants feel *old* or *belittled* when addressed as *oom* or *tannie* (Ellis 2022, p. 237). For obvious reasons, these questions were only directed toward the adult participants (n = 417). Regarding feeling *old* (Table 2), the variables of both age ($p = 0$) and sex ($p = 0.004$) were found to be significant.

Table 2. I feel old when addressed as *oom* or *tannie*.

	18–24	25–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–89
No	33 (14.7%)	3 (11.5%)	11 (19.0%)	5 (11.4%)	18 (38.3%)	7 (41.2%)	0 (0%)
Sometimes	71 (31.7%)	10 (38.5%)	28 (48.3%)	28 (63.6%)	23 (48.9%)	9 (52.9%)	0 (0%)
Yes, always	120 (53.6%)	13 (50.0%)	19 (32.8%)	11 (25.0%)	6 (12.8%)	1 (5.9%)	1 (100%)
Total	224	26	58	44	47	17	1
417							

The two younger cohorts indicated that they *always* feel old when they are addressed as *oom* or *tannie*. If one considers the informal “rule of thumb” in Afrikaans, whereby *oom* and *tannie* are used for persons who are perceived to be ten years and older than the speaker, it makes sense that they may feel a bit old. The majority of participants older than 30 years indicated that they only *sometimes* feel old when addressed as such, with a large

percentage of the 50 years and older participants indicating that they do not feel old when they are addressed as *oom* or *tannie*.

Sex was a significant variable ($p = 0.004$), indicating that male and female participants have different perceptions about feeling old when addressed as *oom* or *tannie* (Ellis 2022, p. 238). The majority of women indicated that they *always* feel old when addressed as *tannie* (46.2%), while the majority of male participants indicated that they only *sometimes* feel old when addressed as *oom* (42.6%) (Ellis 2022, p. 238). Only a quarter of the male participants (25.2%) indicated that they do *not* feel old when someone addresses them as *oom*, while a minority of female participants also indicated *no* (14.5%) (Ellis 2022, p. 238). It is clear that women are more inclined to feel old when addressed as *tannie* than men when they are called *oom*.

One may think that feeling old and belittled are both viewed negatively, but it seems as if there is a distinction to be made between feeling *old* and feeling *belittled*. The former seems to lean toward the *Yes*-side of the scale (which can be interpreted as a negative feeling), whereas the latter leans toward the *No*-side of the scale (which can be interpreted as positive) (Ellis 2022, p. 239). In Table 3, only the variable age ($p = 0.002$) was significant regarding feeling belittled (Ellis 2022, pp. 237–38).

Table 3. I feel belittled when addressed as *oom* or *tannie*.

	18–24	25–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–89
No	199 (89.2%)	23 (88.5%)	51 (87.9%)	33 (75.0%)	43 (89.6%)	11 (82.4%)	0 (0%)
Sometimes	17 (7.6%)	3 (11.5%)	7 (12.1%)	11 (25.0%)	4 (8.3%)	3 (17.6%)	0 (0%)
Yes, always	7 (3.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.1%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
Total	223	26	58	44	47	17	1
	417						

A distinct majority of participants in the different age cohorts (>75%) indicated that they do *not* feel belittled when someone calls them *oom* or *tannie*, which can be attributed to the fact that these forms of address are commonly used to show respect and not to (intentionally) insult the addressee. Only nine participants (2.6%) felt belittled when addressed as *oom* or *tannie*. Seven out of the nine participants fall in the youngest cohort.

How do the respective sexes respond to feeling belittled when addressed as *oom* or *tannie*? Both men (91.0%) and women (84.7%) indicated that they do not believe these forms of address are belittling in nature and do not experience them as such. A small number indicated that they *sometimes* feel belittled, with only 1.3% and 2.7%, respectively, *always* feeling belittled (Ellis 2022, p. 239).

With the next question, the intention was to determine whether the whole group of participants ($n = 2435$) uses *oom* and *tannie* because respondents view them as a respectful form of address. Both age ($p = 0$) and sex ($p = 0.017$) were found to be significant. In terms of age, the results are as follows in Table 4.

A distinct majority of the participants in all age cohorts indicated that they *agree* that they use *oom* and *tannie* as a form of respect toward (usually older) addressees. Regarding the cohorts 12–15 years (64.4%), 16–24 years (70.6%), and 30–39 years (48.3%), most of the participants indicated that they *strongly agree* that these terms are a form of respect. There is no denying that all the above cohorts agree that *oom* and *tannie* are respectful forms of address to use and consequently intended to show respect. Age, therefore, does not matter: these forms of address remain respectful to use.

Table 4. I use *oom* and *tannie* as a sign of respect.

	12–15	16–24	25–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–89
I strongly agree	1238 (64.4%)	226 (70.6%)	11 (42.3%)	28 (48.3%)	17 (38.6%)	23 (47.9%)	4 (23.5%)	0 (0%)
I agree	600 (31.2%)	79 (24.7%)	14 (53.8%)	26 (44.8%)	22 (50.0%)	24 (50.0%)	12 (70.6%)	0 (0%)
I disagree	49 (2.6%)	8 (2.5%)	1 (3.8%)	4 (6.9%)	4 (9.1%)	1 (2.1%)	1 (5.9%)	1 (100%)
I strongly disagree	34 (1.8%)	7 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	1921	320	26	58	44	48	17	1
2435								

In terms of the different sexes, the responses were relatively similar in that both males (62.1%) and females (64.8%) *strongly agreed* that they use *oom* and *tannie* to show respect, whereas 32.2% of men and 31.7% of women stated that they *agreed* (Ellis 2022, p. 246). There remains no doubt that *oom* and *tannie* are perceived as respectful forms of address in Afrikaans.

The next question aimed to determine whether participants feel that (older) persons are more (or overly) sensitive to being addressed as *oom* or *tannie* (Ellis 2022, p. 249), in the sense that these persons will usually make a fuss or take exception when addressed in this way. As this is a difficult question to ask (older) participants in a direct manner (see the reason above), the hope was that the (anonymous) response to the question would be honest. Only the adult participants (n = 415) completed this question; the data are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Older people are sensitive to being addressed as *oom* or *tannie*.

	18–24	25–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–89
I strongly agree	21 (9.5%)	1 (3.8%)	8 (13.8%)	5 (11.4%)	4 (8.5%)	2 (11.8%)	1 (100%)
I agree	106 (47.7%)	12 (46.2%)	28 (48.3%)	24 (54.5%)	27 (57.4%)	8 (47.1%)	0 (0%)
I disagree	78 (35.1%)	12 (46.2%)	20 (34.5%)	15 (34.1%)	16 (34.0%)	7 (41.2%)	0 (0%)
I strongly disagree	17 (7.7%)	1 (3.8%)	2 (3.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	222	26	58	44	47	17	1
415							

Even though the variable age was not significant ($p = 0.411$), it is interesting that the majority of participants in every age cohort indicated that they *agreed* with the statement and that (older) people tended to be more sensitive to being addressed as *oom* or *tannie*. The cohort 25–29 years was split in the middle, with 46.2% indicating that they *agreed* and 46.2% indicating that they *disagreed*. Only the 13.8% in this cohort who *strongly disagreed* ultimately swayed the scale towards disagreeing with the statement. This is also the only age cohort that ultimately *disagreed*, indicating that they feel that (older) Afrikaans persons are not (overly) sensitive when they are called *oom* or *tannie*.

The only significant variable related to this question was sex ($p = 0.001$). A total of 51.7% of female participants *agreed* that older persons are sensitive, whereas only 45.5% of male participants indicated as such. About twice as many women than men (12.3% vs.

6.4%) *strongly agreed* that older people are sensitive, whereas 1.9% of women and 9.6% of men *strongly disagreed* and did not feel that there is any sensitivity related to the use of *oom* and *tannie*. Overall, the results indicate some agreement among men and women, but the female participants are more inclined to agree with the statement (Ellis 2022, p. 251). This indicates that the influence of gender on the perception and use of address forms is evident and deserves further investigation.

With the following two questions, the intention was to determine whether the participants (n = 2434) perceive *oom* and *tannie* to be polite, in addition to being comfortable and informal (Ellis 2022, p. 251). Regarding the politeness of the address forms (Table 6), age was found to be significant ($p = 0$); regarding how comfortable and informal they were perceived to be, age was also indicated as significant ($p = 0.001$) (Ellis 2022, p. 252).

Table 6. The use of *oom* and *tannie* is polite.

	12–15	16–24	25–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–89
I strongly agree	1202 (62.6%)	136 (42.5%)	5 (19.2%)	19 (32.8%)	11 (25.0%)	16 (33.3%)	3 (17.6%)	0 (0%)
I agree	649 (33.8%)	164 (51.3%)	19 (73.1%)	31 (53.4%)	23 (52.3%)	27 (56.3%)	13 (76.5%)	0 (0%)
I disagree	40 (2.1%)	16 (5.0%)	2 (7.7%)	8 (13.8%)	9 (20.5%)	4 (8.3%)	1 (5.9%)	1 (100%)
I strongly disagree	29 (1.5%)	4 (1.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.3%)	1 (2.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	1920	320	26	58	44	48	17	1
	2434							

A distinct majority of the respective age cohorts felt that *oom* and *tannie* are polite forms of address and that they are therefore fitting to use. The 30–39 years (13.8%) and 40–49 years (20.5%) cohorts disagreed that using *oom* and *tannie* is polite. A small number of participants (35; 1.0%) *strongly disagreed* about the polite nature of these forms in Afrikaans.

In terms of sex as a variable, the data were not significant ($p = 0.391$). The male and female participants responded to this question in a similar manner, with the majority distinctly indicating that they perceive *oom* and *tannie* as polite forms of address.

Regarding comfortability and informality (Table 7), the informants perceived *oom* and *tannie* as comfortable and informal forms to use. Less than 15% of all the age cohorts indicated that these forms are neither (socially) comfortable nor informal to use.

In summary, the participants indicated that they did not perceive *oom* and *tannie* as old-fashioned forms of address in Afrikaans. Likewise, the participants did not feel belittled when addressed as *oom* and *tannie*. The younger participants indicated that they felt old when they were addressed as *oom* and *tannie*, but the older participants did not. The female participants were more inclined to feel old when addressed as *tannie*. Regarding these forms of address being respectful in Afrikaans, there is no doubt that the distinct majority perceive *oom* and *tannie* as address forms that show respect to other (older) persons. Of all the age cohorts, only the 25–29-year-olds did not think that (older) persons are too sensitive. Lastly, *oom* and *tannie* were seen as polite, comfortable, and informal forms of address to be used in the Afrikaans language community.

Table 7. The use of *oom* and *tannie* is comfortable and informal.

	12–15	16–24	25–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–89
I strongly agree	679 (35.4%)	125 (39.1%)	5 (19.2%)	12 (20.7%)	10 (22.7%)	11 (22.9%)	3 (17.6%)	0 (0%)
I agree	949 (49.5%)	171 (53.4%)	20 (76.9%)	41 (70.7%)	28 (63.6%)	31 (64.6%)	12 (70.6%)	0 (0%)
I disagree	204 (10.6%)	22 (6.9%)	1 (3.8%)	5 (8.6%)	5 (11.4%)	6 (12.5%)	2 (11.8%)	1 (100%)
I strongly disagree	87 (4.5%)	2 (0.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	1919	320	26	58	44	48	17	1
	2433							

3.2. Interviews

In the section below, the data obtained through interviews will be discussed. The interview questions mainly focused on *how*, *if*, and *why* participants choose certain forms of address when speaking to others. Even though the data will not be presented in terms of the above questions, some conspicuous themes regarding the use and occurrence of *oom* and *tannie* within the Afrikaans community emerged during the interviews. This section will focus on these.

The interviews only included adult persons 18 years and older, with 65 adults participating. The average age of the group was 69 years and consisted of 41 female and 24 male participants (Ellis 2022, p. 160). With the interviews, the intention was to gain insight into (possible) changes that have occurred regarding the use of *oom* and *tannie*.

3.2.1. Age

It was confirmed that age is the main factor to be considered when addressing persons who are not family members and who are (more than) ten years older than themselves (Ellis 2022, pp. 281, 284). One of the participants indicated that she did not use *oom* and *tannie* towards unknown persons because she herself is old and therefore could not use this form of address with anyone (Ellis 2022, p. 281). *Oom* and *tannie* are also commonly used as a term of endearment for older persons (Ellis 2022, p. 281). Age correlates with the sensitivity older persons may experience being addressed as *oom* or *tannie*, as some participants stated that people fear getting old and want to remain young (Ellis 2022, p. 292).

3.2.2. Respect

The pragmatic matter of respect was mentioned a few times during the interviews. According to some participants, the use of *oom* and *tannie* towards older persons is linked to respect, which, in turn, relates to the culture, norms, and upbringing of the speakers (Ellis 2022, pp. 281, 284). One of the participants said that he calls older people *oom* and *tannie* out of “principle” (Ellis 2022, p. 281).

3.2.3. Familiarity

The participants indicated that familiarity as a variable is important to consider when using *oom* and *tannie*. The more familiar the addressees are, the more the speakers will use *oom* and *tannie* to address them, irrespective of family relations (Ellis 2022, p. 282). Keeping in mind that the participants were older than 40 years (Ellis 2022, p. 160), they indicated that they had no problem with addressing familiar persons with *oom* and *tannie*, but this sentiment did not extend to unknown persons (Ellis 2022, p. 282).

3.2.4. Culture and Traditions

As mentioned above, the norms and conventions within a specific culture are important, and they influence the ways in which people act and how they address others. The participants stated that the cultural norms imposed on them while growing up still influence them when deciding on an appropriate form of address (Ellis 2022, p. 282). It is interesting to note that some participants indicated that they were explicitly taught to use *oom* and *tannie*, while others stated that they were never explicitly taught this way but had always used these terms notwithstanding (Ellis 2022, p. 284). As confirmation of what was stated earlier, the general 10-year rule was also mentioned again by participants.

3.2.5. Physical Appearance

It seems as if physical appearance sometimes influences which form of address is used. A 62-year-old female participant stated that she would consider the appearance of people in order to choose a form—if a man were to be in a suit, she would probably call him *Sir*, and if it were an old man talking about the weather, she would probably call him *oom* (Ellis 2022, p. 291).⁸

The same topics and variables identified by means of the questionnaires were revisited during the interviews, namely the role of age, familiarity, status, race, sex, education, culture, and respect (Ellis 2022, p. 297).

4. Discussion

Odendal (1976, p. 107) predicted in his study that the use of *oom* and *tannie* would decline—the data show, however, that the use still had a high occurrence circa 2021. He also commented on the phenomenon that persons ten years and older than the speaker were addressed as *oom* and *tannie*—this still seems to be the norm (Ellis 2022, p. 359). Around the 1980s, studies indicated that *tannie* was deemed a less civil form of address (Wybenga 1981, pp. 110–11), but the data collected for this study suggest otherwise.

Waterlot (2017) indicated that older persons might be offended when addressed with informal forms of address by younger persons, even though the offense was not intended. In Afrikaans, it seems this is not the same—older people are not (as) offended when addressed informally with *oom* and *tannie* (Ellis 2022, p. 332).

Though both male and female participants indicated that older persons exhibit a sensitivity regarding being addressed as *oom* and *tannie*, it is the female participants, however, who seem to be more understanding as to why someone would feel sensitive to being addressed as such (Ellis 2022, p. 334). This is supported by Meyerhoff (2011, p. 219) and Holmes (2008).

From the interview data, the conclusion can be drawn that times are changing, and society is becoming more informal. The (older) participants indicated that they mostly do not care about how they are addressed by younger persons as long as it is performed with respect (Ellis 2022, p. 347). Previously, it was unheard of for younger persons to address older persons with the informal *jy* and *jou*, but today, it seems acceptable, with a use that appears to be increasing. There is, however, an acceptable way to use *jy* and *jou* when addressing older persons, for example, *Tannie, wil jy koffie hê?* (“Tannie, do you want coffee?”) (Ellis 2022, p. 347). The address form should be used first before using *jy*, otherwise it is considered impolite, according to the female interviewees. In reality, direct forms of address in Afrikaans have three possible syntactic positions (at the beginning, the middle, or at the end of a sentence), and each position signifies a different pragmatic function (Combrink 1987, pp. 18–19; Ponelis 1979, p. 505). However, this interplay between syntax and pragmatics lies beyond the scope of the current study, but it remains a relevant topic justifying further research.

Kretzenbacher et al. (2013) focused on the correlation between introductions at international conferences, and the results indicated that the speakers’ culture influences how they navigate local norms. In the South African context, there is a change towards being more informal, and it becomes clear that older persons introduce themselves more readily

these days as *oom* or *tannie*; for example, *Ek is tannie Anna* instead of *Ek is Anna* (Ellis 2022, p. 360).

5. Conclusions

The discussion of previous studies clearly showed that certain gaps exist in the research on Afrikaans forms of address. These gaps include limited recent research on the topic, no specific focus on *oom* and *tannie* in existing studies, and a focus on a limited number of variables. My research managed to address these gaps. The hypothesis that there is a rule of thumb that persons ten years and older than you are addressed with *oom* and *tannie* still seems to be valid. This is not a *prescriptive* norm within the Afrikaans community, however, but merely a customary and useful *guideline*. Furthermore, the data indicate an overall positive feeling towards these forms of address, and older persons (>60 years) experience being called *oom* and *tannie* in a positive light. These findings provide a valuable contemporary contribution to existing Afrikaans literature on forms of address.

Using *oom* and *tannie* is a culturally accepted and polite way to address people and is generally regarded as one of the main ways to show respect within Afrikaans-speaking communities. Appropriate forms of address help to foster a sense of belonging within a particular community or culture. When people use the correct terms and titles to address one another, it reinforces the shared values and norms of the group. This sense of inclusion can provide a comforting feeling of being part of a larger community. In Afrikaans, this includes using the more informal, comfortable, and even comforting *oom* and *tannie*.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The dataset is available on request from the author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Recent international studies include Schoenmakers et al. (2024), Sadowski et al. (2024), and Faria (2024), and in Afrikaans Bosman and Otto (2015) and Hoffmann (2019).
- ² For the purposes of a PhD study.
- ³ Afrikaans forms of address can also be illuminated by developments in the field of postcolonial pragmatics, a relatively new approach to language that explores the colonial history of countries and how this influences language use. Postcolonial communities, such as South Africa, exhibit great ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, as well as social, economic, and political unevenness (Anchimbe and Janney 2011, p. 1451). The language(s) in these communities reflect the mix of colonial and indigenous influences, resulting in unique communicative practices. The colonial and postcolonial context in South Africa is further complicated by it being colonized by both the VOC (Dutch East India Company) and Britain. Pragmatic components relevant to postcolonial pragmatics include history, age, ethnicity, kinship, linguistic background, religion, identity, social class, culture, and gender (Anchimbe 2018, pp. 44–55). For research conducted on Afrikaans forms of address, the postcolonial pragmatic components of age, culture, and gender are relevant to explain communication patterns in Afrikaans, specifically focussing on *oom* and *tannie*. Postcolonial pragmatics, specifically in the South African context, will be applicable to a language study in terms of *longue durée*. The current study focuses on the contemporary use of Afrikaans forms of address.
- ⁴ During the 17th century, a diverse society was established by the Dutch East Indian Company in Cape Town—due to the diversity of the people who arrived, a variety of forms of (spoken) Dutch were introduced to the local population, and this later developed into what we know as Afrikaans today (Ponelis 1993, p. xvii).
- ⁵ This is similar to the findings of Brown and Gilman (1960).
- ⁶ The racial classification system adopted by the South African government post 1994 utilizes the terms *White*, *Black*, *Coloured*, *Indian*, and *Others*.

- ⁷ Formerly known as South West Africa, Namibia was under South African administration from 1919 to 1990. Although not the main focus of their study, it is interesting to know why Namibia, and consequently Afrikaans, is included in the study. According to Stell (2009, p. 85):
- “[...] the varieties spoken in S.W.A./Namibia have pretty much been regarded as a constellation of relocated South African varieties. It seems fair to assume that, up until Independence, these varieties had little sociolinguistic scope for diverging from their South African counterparts and that a state of continuum prevailed on account of greater freedom of movement across the border as well as similar degrees of exposure to prescriptive Standard Afrikaans through education.”
- ⁸ This correlates with Grezel (2002, p. 264), who states that appearance also determines the form of address. He provides a good example of this: “[b]ij de supermarkt krijg ik *u* als ik me geschoren heb, maar met stoppels ben ik ‘jij’. *U* lijkt bedoeld voor het maat- en mantelpak, *jij* past bij de joggingbroek” [At the supermarket, I am addressed with *you* (formal) if I have shaved, but with stubble, I am addressed with *you* (informal). *You* (formal) is seemingly meant for a suit and jacket, and *you* (informal) for sweatpants].

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