

I Love Thee

by [Cristina Nehring](#) (July 2023)



Woman in a Striped Dress, Édouard Vuillard, 1895

When I first arrived in Paris 20 years ago, everybody called

me 'vous.' 'Vous' is the formal version of 'you' and most European languages have an equivalent. English once also maintained a distinction between a formal and informal pronoun, 'you' and 'thee,' but it has been lost. In French, 'tu' is the intimate form which I and all students of French learn in their first week. But after studying French, I came to live in France. It was I who frequently screwed up when addressed and responded with 'tu,' thus insulting my interlocutors with unearned familiarity. Today it is the opposite. People call *me* 'tu' and I—aged creature that I am—reply with 'vous!' My classroom lessons on 'vous' and 'tu' are now squarely out of date. This may be one more chapter in the ongoing story of Americanization and how it affects language.

Don't get me wrong: in my little daughter's school, in the post office, in front of the mayor, the president or in televised news shows 'vous' is still *de rigueur*. But increasingly it's in sharp decline. With shopkeepers, neighbors, and passers-by, 'vous' is often considered in today's France as snotty if not obnoxious.

"Vas-y toi!" "You go ahead!" shouts a man using the easy-going 'you,' who is waiting like I am, to get into the supermarket. We've never met. I'm 50 and he's calling me 'tu!' 'Tu' was for kids under 15 years of age only just recently. This address would not have been possible—or remotely accepted—a few years back.

Many of the people I know in Paris salute the new laid-back style of address: "I'm all for using 'tu' with my customers" says Marco Belkadi who works in my local tea shop. "As opposed to 'vous,' it's friendly! It's convivial!"

The new familiarity is especially common in milieux that consider themselves "youthful and hip," says Cecil Gallois, a baroque singer living in Paris. And it "probably does come from the US," he adds, citing the first names on the cups at

Starbucks which has invaded France. In the very recent past such cups would have read Monsieur Gallois and Madame Nehring not Cecil and Cristina.

'Tu' has taken over France like American sneakers took it over ten years ago. Once upon a time, French people wore patent leather shoes. Everyone. If you saw someone with Nikes it was sure to be an American tourist. I made a bet with my boyfriend that athletic sneakers would never become common in France. They were too ugly and too American. I lost. I lost *big-time*. Now there is a Nike outlet at every street corner and even people who consider themselves distinguished wear sneakers. A hip French fashion site advises woman on the classiest sneakers to wear. "Since sneakers no longer carry the lazy stigma they did in the past," it declares, "a simple pair of white sneakers can look stylish whatever your look."

Same thing with the relaxed *you*. I would have sworn the prickly French would never adopt the laid-back 'tu' outside of intimate circles of family and friends. To be sure, there are still leftovers of the 'vous' address. President Macron, famously, squelched rumors of a gay affair with a media personality (his wife is 25 years older than he is so of course he must be gay, went the sexist reasoning) by saying "We don't even say 'tu' to each other!"—referring to his media acquaintance.

Is this transformation of the age-old French formal address good or bad?

Many people think it's long overdue, that the distances between people underscored by the 'vous' form are archaic and that it's time for a new world to begin. As English teacher, Sebastian Iragui points out, when a new instructor arrives in his faculty, 'vous' is used for about five minutes and then one of the actors involved suggests, as though struck by sudden inspiration, "We can use 'tu,' can't we?"

"I don't care about it at all," says my French editor, Amelie Petit, the founder of *Premier Parallele*, a boutique publishing house.

And then again, there are those who *do* care—and who consider the loss of the *Vous* the death of civilization as they know it.

"How ever do you impose a polite distance between people without it?" asks veteran journalist, Francois Leroux.

Obviously distance is—or was—key to French culture.

It is refreshing, on one hand, to remove those distances and to be on equal ground when you start a conversation with a stranger. On the other hand, to skip the formal address with an immediate personal, one marks a loss—a bit like greeting everyone with a wet kiss. Living in France, I have come to think it is actually unsexy—as though you presented yourself nude on a first date. The mystery, the excitement of *true* intimacy as opposed rests on overcoming distance.

Patricia Kaas, the now-56-year-old French-Alsatian pop star, knows this well. One of her most famous tunes is called "Je te dis Vous." It is about a young singer who meets the man and the musician of her dreams as she performs in a small-town cabaret. Their electricity is instant but the singer does not assume a passionate future. She feels magically close to the musician in her bar and thinks of him as 'tu' but resists easy intimacy. "Je te dis Vous" is her solution, an untranslatable sentence, the gist of which is something like "I call you stranger, my lover."

Without the 'vous,' the whole song would collapse. Without the 'vous,' the whole song would become trite, not poignant and powerful.

The conventional wisdom has it that distance between yourself and your beloved indicates you are frigid and repressed, but

the truth may be that distance can create chemistry; it can create awe and electricity—and—ultimately—an ecstatic union that would not otherwise have been possible.

My French lover called me 'tu' at most moments of the day but when he really had something important to say he used the word 'vous.'

"Je Vous aime," he said, as he held me in his embrace. Far from creating a space between us, it created an explosion of earned intimacy.

We shall see where this will go in France, the country of distance and romance. For the time being, we remain in limbo; we increasingly say 'tu' to our retailers, restaurant owners, professors and politicians but ultimately, when the stakes are high, will we use the formal you? The French adoption of athletic wear is not encouraging. Soon the waiters in France may be saying "Hi! I'm Andy!" Yikes.

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Cristina Nehring's first book, *A Vindication of Love: Reclaiming Romance for the 21st Century*, was reviewed enthusiastically on the front cover of the *New York Times* Book Review. Since then, she has written for the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Oprah*, *Elle*, *Tablet* and *New York Magazine*—as well as the *NYT*, the *LAT* and the *WSJ*. She has also published two books in French and has a forthcoming book, *The Child Who Never Spoke: 23 1/2 Lessons in Fragility* coming out with Heliotrope in October and available for preorder on Amazon in late July.

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