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## ‘We’ but Not ‘Me’: A Sociolinguistic Study of the Speaker-exclusive First Person Plural Pronoun ‘We’

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# **‘We’ but Not ‘Me’: A Sociolinguistic Study of the Speaker-exclusive First Person Plural Pronoun ‘We’**

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Speaker-exclusive ‘we’ (SEW) is an under-researched area of linguistics. In this paper, health professionals’ and non-health professionals’ perceptions and attitudes towards the speaker-exclusive ‘we’ are investigated to explore differences and similarities in both German and Australian contexts. Data were collected through the distribution of an online matched guise survey. Findings of 40 Australian and 36 German participants show a strong correlation between speaker-exclusive ‘we’ usage and feelings of intimacy and familiarity in German and English. Australian attitudes towards SEW appear to be more positive and/or indifferent, whereas most Germans tended to dislike the use of SEW.

## **1 Introduction**

The first person plural pronoun ‘we’ has been subject to much ambiguity in semantics concerning its reference (De Cock 2011). Specifically, ‘we’ has been discussed with respect to its exclusive and inclusive nature across languages (De Cock 2011). Yet the inclusion of the self in the pronoun ‘we’ is often presupposed and remains unquestioned and neglected (Du Bois 2012). Just a small number of sociolinguistic studies have focused on non-prototypical uses of ‘we’, and mostly in the context of health professionals (Du Bois 2012, Hogeweg and de Hoop 2015). Previous studies on the use of the speaker-exclusive first person plural pronoun ‘we’, hereafter called SEW, are generally limited to health professional contexts due to the generally accepted association of SEW as an encouraging and inclusive pronoun aimed to establish a trustful partnership between doctor and patient (Skelton et al. 2002).

The aim of this study is to explore motivations for both German and English speakers to use SEW. I investigate in what context English and German speakers use SEW and what social meaning may be associated with the pronoun. In this study, I contrast attitudes and perceptions towards SEW use between a group of health professionals and a group of non-health professionals in Australia and Germany. I am interested in comparing the usage of the pronoun between English and German speakers, and determining whether the existence of the formal pronoun ‘Sie’ (you, formal) in German impacts on a speaker’s pronoun choice. I will also investigate individuals’ feelings towards the speaker-exclusive first person plural pronoun by using a matched guise test (Lambert et al. 1960, embedded within an online survey—an approach that has not yet been adopted in studies of SEW). The aim of the study is to deepen an understanding of the social connotations associated with SEW: whether these are affected by a person’s first language and their profession in the case that they work in healthcare (Hogeweg and de Hoop 2015). In light of previous studies, I expect to find evidence for the prototypical use of SEW in health professional contexts as well as differing opinions on the social meaning of SEW, specifically, when comparing German and Australian participants.

The following research questions will be investigated:

- (1) What factors (gender, age, nationality, place of residence) may influence people’s reported use of SEW?
- (2) Is SEW more commonly used by health professionals as opposed to non-health professionals?
- (3) Is SEW used differently or in the same way between German and English speakers, and in what contexts?

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Personal Pronouns**

Personal pronouns have been of great interest to linguists in the fields of sociolinguistics, semantics, and pragmatics due to their frequent usage in everyday conversations (De Cock and Kluge 2016). The flexible nature of pronouns has long been discussed and critically assessed, mainly with a focus on prototypical uses of personal pronouns, however (Helmbrecht 2015). In relation to SEW, studies have primarily focused on its addressee inclusiveness or exclusiveness (Helmbrecht 2015). In other words, using ‘we’ has been found to distinguish between inclusive and exclusive reference to the addressee. Nunberg (1993) argues that if one ignores the plurality that ‘we’ implies and only considers its deictic component, then ‘we’ and ‘I’ are semantically homogenous. As

such, he suggests that the speaker remains a part of the first person plural pronoun, while plurality and external referents may vary (Nunberg 1993).

Studies have further found that semantically 'we' is an extension of the self (Goddard 1995, Brewer and Gardner 1996). Goddard (1995) notes that the first person plural pronoun indicates that one is both speaking for oneself and on behalf of someone else or a group of people. According to his argument, 'we' can be defined by applying the same proposition to all people involved, including oneself (Goddard 1995). Thus, he acknowledges variation across languages yet maintains the view that 'we' must always include the speaker.

## 2.2 Speaker-exclusive 'We'

More recent studies have paid attention to the speaker-exclusive usage of 'we' (De Cock 2011, Du Bois 2012). Hogeweg and de Hoop (2015) observe the common occurrence of SEW in a professional nursing context. Indeed, SEW use has mainly been discussed with reference to clinical communication (Hogeweg and de Hoop 2015). For instance, the question "How are we feeling today?" is strongly associated with a doctor-patient environment (Hogeweg and de Hoop 2015). By the same token, Helmbrecht (2015) has explored the non-prototypical use of the first person plural pronoun. He argues that the deictic centre of personal pronouns typically refers to the speaker. Yet, the deictic centre may shift to other interlocutors in certain contexts (Helmbrecht 2015). With regards to SEW, Helmbrecht (2015) then draws on the idea of a "pseudo inclusive". While the purpose of the pseudo inclusive is to establish an inclusive relationship, it may be offensive to the addressee depending on context (Steffens and Haslam 2013). This is due to the assumption that the first person plural pronoun confers some sort of authority onto the speaker (Steffens and Haslam 2013, Weiss et al. 2017). In pragmatics, the pseudo inclusive has been found to be an effective tool for professionals in leading positions (Steffens and Haslam 2013, Weiss et al. 2017). The collective implicature of 'we' enables speakers to influence and mobilise their addressees by provoking a sense of equality (Steffens and Haslam 2013). Furthermore, SEW has been found to communicate the speaker's commitment to employees or patients in a working environment (Steffens and Haslam 2013).

Helmbrecht (2015) asserts that the use of the pseudo inclusive is popular in the German language, due to its inclusive nature, which is distinctive from the formal pronoun 'Sie' in German (Meissner 2004). He therefore suggests that SEW and 'Sie' ('you' formal) can be distinguished due to their different social connotations in the German language. Additionally, many German speakers are increasingly uncertain about the context in which to use 'Sie' and 'du' (Clyne et al. 2006). Consequently, SEW may offer an alternative address strategy (Clyne et al. 2006). Du Bois (2012) addresses the speaker-exclusive usage of 'we' in English and German. He argues that this use of the pronoun is typically associated with politeness strategies in both languages. He refers to this as the "directive plural" use of the pronoun (Du Bois 2012:324), indicating its positive connotations when used in request situations, for example. In the current research, participants appeared to associate politeness with a more positive and friendly feeling, as opposed to the typical "negative" connotations of politeness, such as distance in relationship to the interlocutor's status (Brown and Levinson 1987). This surprising finding may correlate with the ambiguous use of SEW and will be thoroughly investigated in the discussion. By using SEW, speakers attempt to create closeness to indicate that one is at the same level as the addressee (Du Bois 2012). Contrastively to Helmbrecht's (2015) claim, Du Bois (2012) argues that SEW is rarely used in a German context due to the strong association between SEW and child-directed speech. Hence, using SEW with adults may offend German speakers (Du Bois 2012).

## 2.3 Language Attitudes

In sociolinguistic research, language attitudes have typically been measured using either a direct or indirect approach (Garrett et al. 2003). A direct approach may be demonstrated by directly asking individuals (e.g., in interviews, questionnaires) about specific language variables. In illustration, Schmidt-Rinehart and LeLoup's (2017) research on pronoun choices in Costa Rica involved participants explaining their opinions and perceptions of pronouns and pronoun use in interviews. They found that respect and trust were the most salient factors impacting on Spanish speakers' pronoun use. Hence, to distinguish between these stances, two distinct pronoun forms were used.

In contrast, for indirect approaches to studying language attitudes, the matched guise test (MGT) has typically been used in sociolinguistic studies (Garrett et al. 2003). The MGT, originally developed by Lambert et al. (1960), has been found to be effective in investigating attitudes towards linguistic variables. This is due to the fact that the MGT allows participants to state their true feelings towards language variables (Lambert et al. 1960). An MGT typically consists of short audio recordings that are played to participants, testing the language feature of interest (Garrett et al. 2003). The MGT has mainly been used to test attitudes towards dialects, accents, and languages (Garrett et al. 2003). For example, Ball (1983) explored stereotypes of Anglo-Saxon and non-Anglo-Saxon accents in Australia by employing an MGT. He found that English Received Pronunciation was associated with high competence and relatively low social attractiveness, American accents elicited stereotypes

of moderate-high confidence, and Australian accents appeared to be associated with a friendly but lazy character (Ball 1983). Many recent sociolinguistic studies have used MGTs to determine social stereotypes through language attitudes (e.g., Buchstaller 2006, McKenzie 2008, Loudermilk 2015), however, none with respect to personal pronouns.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The target participants of this study were adults aged 18 and over, consisting of English-speaking Australian health professionals, German-speaking German health professionals, and Australians and Germans with non-health related professions or occupations. Table 1 illustrates all survey participants according to gender and profession. Data were obtained through the distribution of an online survey over a period of 2 weeks, using Google Forms.

Voice actors were tasked with creating stimulus for the MGT: 2 Germans (1 male and 1 female from Northern Germany) and 2 Australians (1 male and 1 female from Melbourne), all of whom were in their mid-twenties; they did not participate as survey respondents. Hence, these voice actors were recorded to create stimulus for the MGT embedded in the online survey. A link was included in the survey to access the pre-recorded oral section. The survey was distributed in German for the German participants and in English for the Australian participants.

**Table 1:** Survey participants by gender and profession

Nationality	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Total
	Female Health Professionals 18+	Female Non-Health Professionals 18+	Male Health Professionals 18+	Male Non-Health Professionals 18+	
Non-Australian (residing in Australia)	0	4	2	0	<b>6</b>
Australian (residing in Australia)	6	17	4	7	<b>34</b>
German (residing in Germany)	4	18	4	10	<b>36</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>76</b>

#### 3.2 Research Design: The Online Survey

The online survey was split into three main sections. Section 1 was split into two parts: A and B. In Section 1 Part A, participants were asked to reflect upon their own language use, specifically with respect to SEW (see Appendix A). Section 1 Part B contained the same questions as in Part A, but participants were asked to reflect upon other people's language use.

Section 2 was again split into Part A and Part B. First, in Part A, participants were asked to imagine themselves in three different roles (health care employee, retail employee, friend) to determine if those roles would affect their own use of SEW (see Appendix A). Then, in Part B, participants were asked how it would make them feel if other people used SEW in these three different roles.

Section 3 used an MGT to determine attitudes towards the usage of SEW (see Appendix B). For this section, participants were asked to listen to four short recordings of scripted pronoun use, some of which included SEW. Throughout the survey, participants' responses included multiple choice and free text expression.

##### 3.2.1. Matched Guise Test (MGT)

More specifically, the purpose of the MGT was to see whether SEW has negative or positive connotations for respondents from different linguistic and professional backgrounds. Hence, participants were asked to listen to four short recordings of scripted pronoun use, some of which included SEW (see Appendix B). The duration of all recordings varied between 3 to 4 seconds and the same speakers were used as stimuli throughout all recordings. Survey participants were asked to only evaluate the speaker who was asking the questions (Speaker 1) along a series of personality traits: *friendly/unfriendly*, *polite/impolite*, *respectful/disrespectful*, *educated/uneducated*, and *caring/uncaring*. Participants were also asked to guess demographic information about the speaker (profession, place of residence, and age).

**3.3 Data Analysis**

In Questions 1, 3, 4, and 5 (see Appendix A), participants had the option to offer an alternative answer to the ones provided. I considered all those answers and excluded only those that were not directly relevant to the question. I then compared the findings of these questions as well as the multiple-choice question (Question 2) and multiple-choice grid (Question 6) across both language surveys. Likewise, I analysed all answers to the scenarios (Questions 7–9) according to common trends and themes. I then analysed all results of the online survey, comparing findings between the German and Australian participants. I also analysed results between health-professionals and non-health professionals to investigate any differences and/or similarities. The findings of the MGT were compared to previous research on language attitudes with respect to pronouns. I analysed open-ended responses qualitatively for common themes. Correlations between demographic information (nationality, sex, profession, place of residence, and age) were drawn when analysing the quantitative and qualitative data.

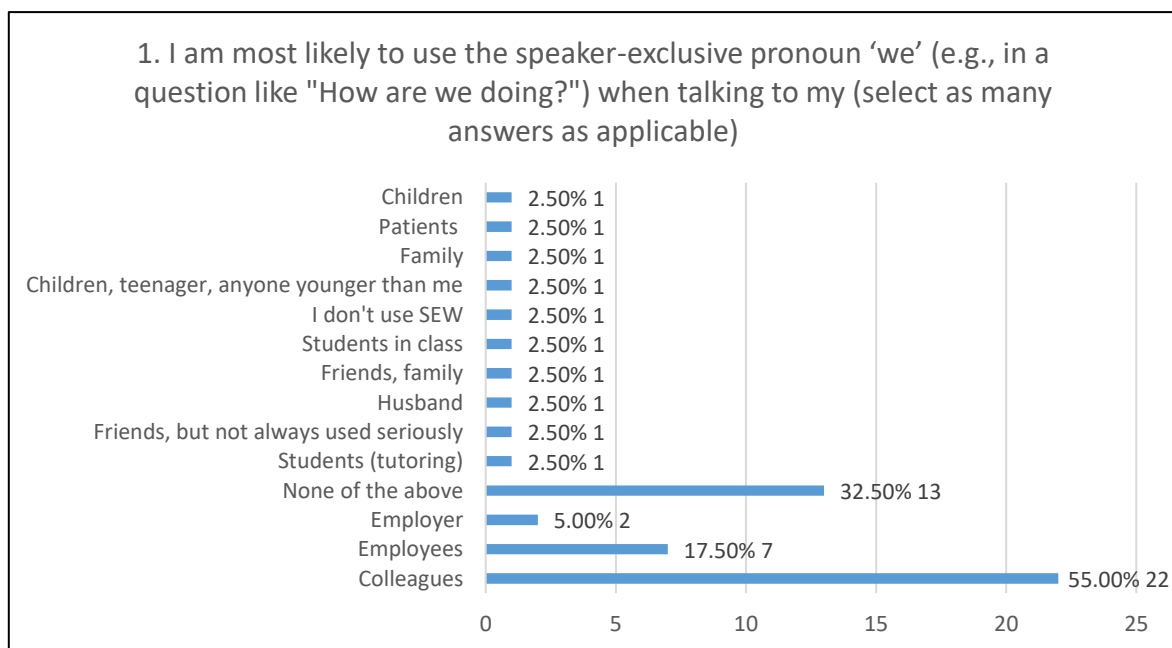
**4 Results and Analysis**

All German participants stated that they were both of German nationality and resident in Germany; however, while all English-speaking participants stated that they were resident in Australia, 6 of them stated that they were non-Australian. This may be representative of the culturally diverse population of Australia, and no statistically significant differences were found when comparing participants' responses according to their reported nationality. Thus, all answers are considered in the same way and all English-speaking participants are referred to as Australians. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 83 years, allowing a broad analysis. The average age for the German participants was 41 with a standard deviation of 16.51, and the average age for the Australian participants was 32.52, with a standard deviation of 14.78.

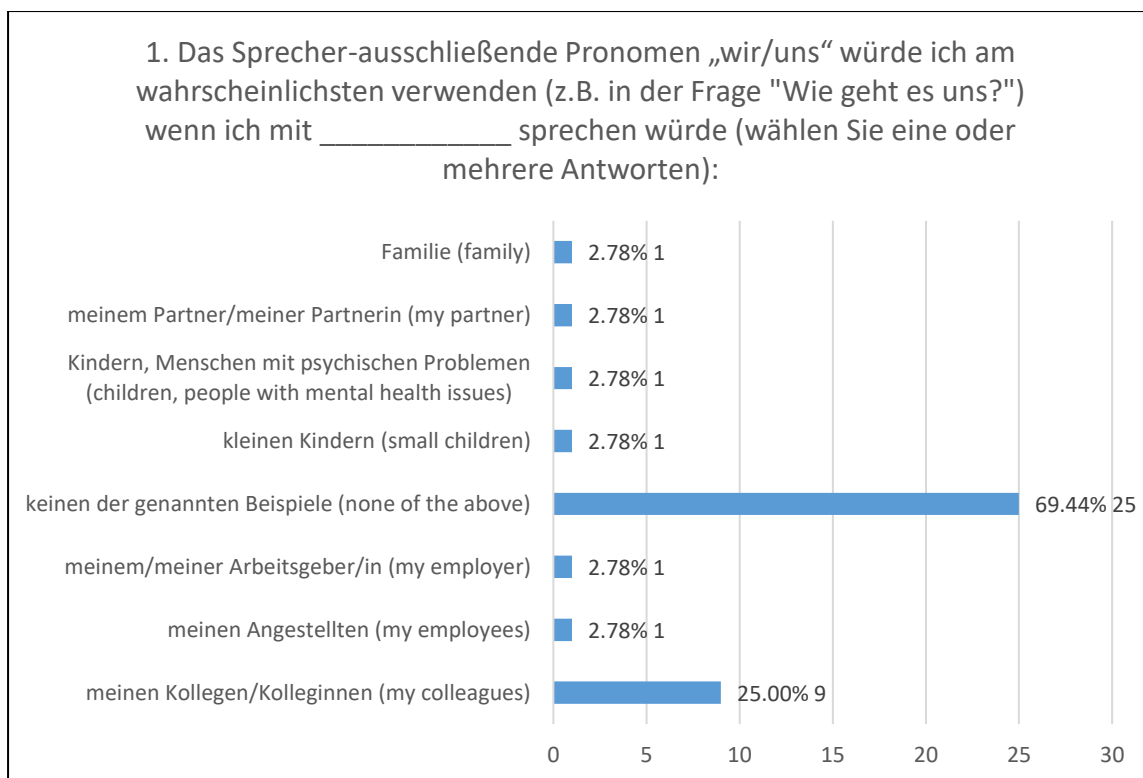
The age and gender of participants did not seem to impact on the participants' general SEW usage. However, the younger participants (aged 19–35) appeared to be more comfortable using SEW with friends.

**4.1 Use of SEW in Formal and Casual Settings**

While most Australian survey respondents stated that they used SEW in interactions with colleagues, the vast majority of German survey respondents indicated that they did not use SEW at all (see Figures 1 and 2). Using SEW with colleagues appeared to be the second most popular answer selected by 25% of the German survey participants. Almost 30% of the Australian respondents claimed not to use SEW in either of the given examples and instead offered alternatives. However, when asked about other people's SEW use, over half of the Australian participants stated that it was most commonly used by employers to their employees. German participants' responses appeared to be more evenly spread: 33.3% stated that SEW was used between colleagues and 55.6% indicated that SEW was not used at all.



**Figure 1:** Australian participants' reported use of SEW.



**Figure 2:** German participants' reported use of SEW.

The majority of Australian participants stated that they use SEW in a casual setting with friends. In contrast, a slight majority of German survey respondents claimed to avoid using SEW with friends. Of the Australian respondents, 80% stated that their friends would occasionally use SEW, while 60% of the German respondents stated that their friends would never use SEW. However, both German and Australian participants appeared to be more likely to use SEW with someone they had known for a longer period as opposed to someone they had only recently met. This result also aligned with their views about other people's use of SEW. Nevertheless, these results were fairly diverse, indicating there may be individual attitudes towards the appropriateness of SEW in different contexts.

#### 4.2 Age and Sex Differences

All respondents, Germans and Australians combined, indicated that gender did not play a role in their SEW pronoun choice. Yet, 57% of Australian participants stated that they would be more likely to use SEW with someone who identifies as the same gender as themselves. These responses aligned with the responses for other people's language use.

Australian participants reported that they were most likely to use SEW with adults than with teenagers and children. In contrast, German participants reported that they were most likely to use SEW when talking to children, followed by adults, and a quarter of German respondents reported using SEW with teenagers and adults older than 65. Both German and Australian participants agreed that SEW was most likely to be used by adults aged 18–65.

#### 4.3 Open-ended Responses to Questions

“If I use speaker-exclusive ‘we’, I am trying to express...” and  
 “When others use speaker-exclusive ‘we’, what do you think they are trying to express?”

In all of the following sections, verbatim responses from survey participants will be used to illustrate attitudes towards SEW.

Australian respondents reported most often wanting to express inclusiveness, closeness, politeness, solidarity, and equality when using SEW. The correlation of politeness and qualities such as solidarity and closeness appears to be contradictory, yet it emphasises the blurring connotations of SEW as a pronoun establishing trust and the association of the pronoun as a pseudo inclusive. Specifically, 5 respondents specified that when using SEW, and

being in a higher position than their interlocutor, it was an appropriate way to mitigate power relations. This can be illustrated in the following example:

- (1) The most prominent use I can think of is when I am in a position of power and either trying to refrain from the more stand-offish "you" (e.g., "How are we all today?") or trying to soften an imperative (e.g., with a student, "Now what do we have to do next?", when they are the one doing the work).

Some of these themes were shared by German participants, in particular, with regard to solidarity, compassion, and commonality. Again, respondents indicated that using SEW was particularly helpful when acting in a position of power. However, besides being able to avoid hierarchy and directness, Germans also claimed to use SEW as a joke. Hence, SEW was associated with being a fun way to address someone, as well as a nonsensical one.

- (2) Auf der einen Seite wirkt es auflockernd. Auf der anderen Seite verhindert es, dass eine Aussage zu direkt rüber kommt. [On the one hand it has a cheering effect. On the other hand, it prevents a statement from coming across as too direct.]

Interestingly, the answers differed slightly when reflecting upon other people's use of SEW. These answers appeared to be more negative, specifically with respect to the German survey respondents. Australian participants were mostly consistent in their answers concerning their own use of SEW and others' use of SEW. However, some Australian respondents stressed that when others use SEW, it was mostly to create a closeness that does not really exist. Additionally, it was strongly associated with authority.

- (3) I think people that use speaker-exclusive 'we' would like to think that they know the other person on a more personal level.
- (4) Friendliness. It can come across as a bit patronising though too, often expresses a degree of hierarchy.

German respondents were generally more critical concerning other people's use of SEW. Most stated that SEW was used by others to feign intimacy. One respondent stated that SEW was most likely to be used by someone who was unsure about how they should address someone.

- (5) Eine Vertrautheit, die eigentlich nicht da ist. [A familiarity that actually does not exist.]
- (6) Interesse, Fürsorge (die keine wirkliche ist) eigentlich Überheblichkeit.  
[Interest, care (that is illusory) actually arrogance.]

#### 4.4 Scenarios: Participant's Own Pronoun Use

There were three scenarios, for each of which participants were asked to pick the pronoun they were most likely to use in the given situation (see Appendix A). In the first scenario, participants were asked to imagine working as a health professional. The majority of both German and Australian respondents reported they would not use SEW in this context. German participants all preferred to use the formal second person singular pronoun 'Sie'; only 5.5% of the German participants stated they would use SEW in this context. In contrast, most Australian respondents stated they would use the second person singular pronoun 'you'; 33% of Australian participants stated using SEW was appropriate in this context. In the second scenario, participants were asked to imagine working in retail. Again, most Australian respondents reported they would use the second person singular pronoun 'you' as opposed to SEW. None of the German participants reported using SEW in this context. The third scenario invited participants to imagine meeting up with a friend. Again, SEW was only selected by 17.5% of the Australian participants and by 2.7% of the German participants.

#### 4.5 Scenarios: Other People's Pronoun Use

The same scenarios were then presented to the survey participants with the difference of imagining that this time, in all of these three contexts, the relevant people (a health professional, a person working in retail, and a friend) used SEW to greet them. Participants were asked how it would make them feel. The findings for Australian participants varied. Approximately 40% of the participants stated that if a health professional addressed them with SEW, they would feel comforted, relaxed, or indifferent.

- (7) Overall it's just friendlier and less intense.
- (8) Not significantly different to "how are you feeling". Seems a bit more casual, upbeat.

However, the remaining 60% stated that in this situation they would feel uncomfortable, patronised, and strange. Furthermore, a quarter of Australian participants stated that SEW in this context is patronising and feels impersonal, as the following response illustrates.

(9) Patronised and like I won't be listened to.

Only 6 of the German participants perceived SEW used by a health professional as positive or indifferent. Hence, the vast majority reacted strongly to this scenario, stating that they would feel angry, irritated, or devalued. In fact, some participants reported that it was rude and old-fashioned to use SEW in this context, and that they would not feel taken seriously.

(10) Ich spreche das an! Ist unangemessen! [I would address it! It's inappropriate!]

(11) Unglauben dass diese Floskel noch verwendet wird. [Disbelief that this phrase is still used.]

In the context of the retail environment, the Australian participants' reaction to SEW was split again. A slight majority (53%) indicated that they would feel indifferent, at ease, or comfortable. Interestingly, some stated that it was an Australian expression and others reported that they would prefer the use of SEW in this context as opposed to the first scenario.

(12) This doesn't bother me as much as the doctor scenario, because this is a more casual setting.

(13) Friendlier and less formal—it rings quite like a friendly Aussie neighbour kind of vibe.

German respondents, however, did not seem to expect the use of SEW in this context. Most participants stated that they would feel confused, ridiculed, or uncomfortable. The majority further enforced the idea of SEW as too personal in this particular context. One participant elaborated that this pronoun use would be appropriate in Berlin, but strange in other states, hinting at regional differences.

(14) In Berlin ist der gebürtige Berliner sehr direkt und dort fühlt sich das nett an. In anderen Gegenden würde ich wahrscheinlich eine gewisse Überheblichkeit mir gegenüber empfinden.

[A native of Berlin is very direct and thus in Berlin this would feel friendly. In other areas, I would probably perceive that person as being arrogant towards me.]

In the scenario of a friend using SEW, Australian participants reacted more strongly than in the first two scenarios. SEW used by a friend was mostly perceived as strange or considered to be said in jest by a friend.

(15) That just sounds odd because when you are talking to a friend you specifically want to know how they have been. Which is also the same as the doctor but in this scenario it's not a formal setting that could require making the vibe lighter and friendlier. You are already friends, no need to beat around the bush.

German participants responded similarly to this scenario. Astonishment and irony were the most common reactions. Most respondents stated that although they would find it strange, they would simply think their friend was joking, while a few participants stated that they would feel offended in this context.

(16) Ich würde es als ironisch formuliert auffassen. [I would interpret it as ironically worded.]

#### 4.6 MGT

The findings of the MGT reveal that SEW remains strongly associated with health professionals in both German and English. There was no great variation in language attitudes between SEW and the second person singular pronoun in English. Even though the length of recordings was minimized to focus on the pronoun use, some participants reacted to other variables such as the difference between “doing” and “feeling” in “How are we doing?” and “How are we feeling?” As such, SEW was preferred in the question “How are we feeling?” as opposed to the question “How are we doing?”, mainly due to the fact that SEW, together with “feeling”, appeared to sound more *caring*, *polite*, and *respectful*. SEW in this context was perceived as the most *polite* and *friendly* pronoun and strongly associated with a doctor directing a question towards a patient.

(17) Sounds like a doctor asking their patient a question.

(18) Sounds like he has learnt to ask this question as part of his job.



In contrast, SEW in the more casual question “How are we doing?” was perceived as the least *friendly, polite, respectful, educated, and caring*. In this context, attitudes were further split in terms of demographic distribution. Hence, 23 respondents associated this use of SEW with someone who lives in an urban area, and the other 17 respondents with the speaker’s residence in a rural setting. A slight majority (60%) associated this use of SEW with a non-health professional.

- (19) The person asking the question sounded like he didn’t care to ask the question but felt he had to, this didn’t come across as respectful or caring and I would hope he wasn’t a health professional if that’s the case.

In German, the attitudes towards SEW, the second person singular pronoun ‘du’, and the formal second person singular pronoun ‘Sie’ were more diverse. Both ‘du’ and ‘Sie’ were perceived as more *friendly, polite, educated*, and especially more *respectful* than SEW. Interestingly, only ‘Sie’ was classified as sounding a little more *caring* than any other pronoun. In addition, the answers enforced the idea of ‘Sie’ as the most *respectful* pronoun.

- (20) Sehr höflich, aber auch eher distanziert. [Very polite, yet also slightly more reserved.]

‘Du’ was viewed as more *friendly* and *polite*. This is surprising, since ‘Sie’ is typically associated with politeness. However, ‘du’ here was perceived as the more intimate pronoun.

- (21) Die Verwendung der du Form legt einen privaten Kontext nahe. [The use of ‘du’ suggests a more private context.]

Both uses of SEW were strongly associated with health professionals and more authority, as well as the use of ‘Sie’, albeit to a slightly lesser extent than SEW. Furthermore, the speaker was classified as older when using SEW. Again, this may be explained due to the fact that SEW appears to be an old-fashioned pronoun use in German.

- (22) Ich würde die Frage “Wie geht es uns denn heute?” eigentlich nur von einem Arzt, der dadurch leicht überheblich wirkt, erwarten. [I would only expect the question “How are we doing today?” from a doctor who seems a little arrogant by using this pronoun form.]

#### 4.7 Health Professionals

Comparing responses between the German and Australian health professionals, it appears that most health professionals seem to have strong opinions towards SEW. In a health professional context, 7 out of 8 German and 9 out of 12 Australian health professionals indicated that they would not use SEW. Of the German health professionals, 87.5% reacted negatively to the scenario of a health professional using SEW towards them. Most stated they would not feel taken seriously, and some reported they would feel alienated from the doctor and ashamed on behalf of him or her.

- (23) Ich fühle mich nicht ernst genommen. [I don’t feel taken seriously.]

- (24) Abwertung des Arztes. [Devaluation by the doctor.]

Of the Australian health professionals, 4 out of 12 reacted positively or indifferently to this scenario. Yet, the remaining 8 did report that it would make them feel uncomfortable and patronised, and that they did not feel it was professional to use SEW in this context.

- (25) Patronised, I don’t like the use of the ‘we’ in medical history. It doesn’t allow me to share.

- (26) A little bit bothered because I think it is unprofessional.

However, 38% of German health professionals and 58% of Australian health professionals reported using SEW when talking to friends. Therefore, SEW was viewed as rather inappropriate in a doctor-patient context, but more acceptable in a casual setting.

#### 4.8 MGT: Health Professionals

All German health professionals estimated that the person speaking in the recordings in which the speaker used SEW was a health professional. Similarly, 83.3% of Australian health professionals associated SEW with a health professional. However, the pronoun 'you' was evaluated most positively in the question "How are you feeling?".

(27) Person is very professional as it is an expression I would use myself.

In contrast, the use of SEW in the question "How are we feeling?" was mostly judged as unprofessional and too casual.

(28) It's more of a casual conversation starter. Friendly, but not professional.

Interestingly, one German health professional stated that during his education he had learnt that the use of SEW was inappropriate in a health professional context.

(29) Bereits vor 30 Jahren wurden wir in der Ausbildung darauf hingewiesen, dass diese Formulierung unangemessen ist. [Even 30 years ago we were told in our studies that this wording is inappropriate.]

Overall, all German and most Australian health professionals disliked the use of SEW in a health professional context.

### 5 Discussion

The results presented in this paper have both reaffirmed previous studies on the matter of SEW (Steffens and Haslam 2013, Weiss et al. 2017) and introduced some novel perspectives. In a German context, SEW appeared to be rarely used, irrespective of the participants' personal details and demographic background. Other than Helmbrecht's (2015) claim that SEW offers a potential alternative to 'Sie' and 'du' in German, SEW does not appear to be popular among German speakers. In fact, most people stated that they would feel offended or ridiculed if addressed with SEW by anyone. Nevertheless, one German participant expressed their view that SEW may be used when unsure what other pronoun would be appropriate. This may reflect the fact that the use of formal 'Sie' has gradually declined in the German language, increasingly leading to misunderstanding and ambiguity (Clyne et al. 2006).

Younger participants generally appeared to use SEW more frequently. This may be due to the fact that younger participants did not grow up with the strong association between the use of SEW and doctor-patient relationships.

This study further revealed that 'du' appeared to be most closely associated with friendliness and politeness. In the context of German pronouns, the use of 'du' typically indicates a closer relationship between interlocutors and is thus associated with a more familiar feeling. Surprisingly, participants felt that 'du' was also a polite pronoun, which may be explained by Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive politeness strategies. Positive politeness strategies may be defined as avoiding offence by emphasising friendliness (Brown and Levinson 1987). Hence, in the case of using 'du', friendliness is presumed and subsequently allows for positive politeness. In contrast, 'Sie' was viewed as respectful yet less polite, due to its association with unfamiliarity and distance. As such, the more typical association of negative politeness or deference applies when using the formal pronoun 'Sie'.

However, neither German nor Australian participants were consistent in their view of whether SEW was a more intimate or a more distant way of addressing someone. This may be a result of a conflict in their own attitudes towards SEW or indicate that uses of SEW are strongly individualised. Indeed, according to the survey, the usage of SEW appears to depend on context. Most survey respondents reported that SEW was too casual in a formal context, such as a doctor-patient setting. In contrast, particularly for Australian participants, SEW was felt to be superfluous when talking with friends, since one would not have to establish solidarity or familiarity, which appeared to be the social function of SEW.

Germans primarily perceived SEW as a way of expressing a joke or irony when used by or with friends. The humorous nature of SEW was also noted by a number of Australian participants, claiming that SEW was a funny yet friendly way to address people close to you. This indicates that SEW may be most commonly used and accepted in a casual and familiar setting. By the same token, Germans did state that they would find it strange if a stranger were to greet them with SEW in a retail environment. In contrast, Australians did not seem to mind the use of SEW in this context. In fact, some stated that the use of SEW in this context seemed normal, specifically with regard to Australians.

As Du Bois (2012) argues, SEW is commonly used among people with more social power when speaking to their subordinates. This claim was reaffirmed in this study, since SEW was viewed as most commonly used by employers to their employees in an Australian context. Germans indicated that SEW is a way to avoid directness. Hence, SEW was associated with executing polite commands in both a German and Australian context. Drawing on the matter of directness, SEW may be defined as rather indirect, enabling a degree of politeness and familiarity that both 'Sie' and 'du' in German fail to achieve (Meissner 2004). Directives appeared to be most closely associated with using SEW in German and English. This draws attention to the "authoritarian" characteristics of SEW, which confirms the findings of previous studies (Steffens and Haslam 2013, Weiss et al. 2018). A combination of inclusiveness and indirectness may influence participants' pronoun choice in both English and German.

Most Germans tended to be most likely to use SEW when interacting with children. Du Bois (2012) draws attention to the use of SEW in child-directed speech, which is commonly used when telling children how to behave in social situations. Thus, in this context, SEW implies speaking on behalf of someone and dependence. Specifically, Germans perceived this connotation more strongly and, as a result, the majority stated they would not feel taken seriously or respected if someone used SEW with them. Hence, while SEW has been found to be used to express politeness in English, it may indicate lack of respect in German, specifically when speaking with someone unfamiliar or with a health professional (Du Bois 2012).

Linking this phenomenon to the attitudes towards this variable that are illustrated in the findings of MGT, it becomes apparent that Germans primarily associated the use of SEW with arrogance, specifically with respect to health professionals. In an Australian context, SEW was associated with politeness and friendliness, again, indicating participants' positive associations with politeness as a strategy of friendliness. As Schmidt-Rinehart and LeLoup (2017) findings in Spanish suggest, distinct pronouns are used to express different social variables. As such, while 'Sie' expresses respect in German and 'du' expresses intimacy and familiarity, there is no such distinction in English. This may potentially explain why SEW is more commonly used among English speakers, since it allows interlocutors to indicate a common relationship. Yet, as the findings of this study have demonstrated, the social connotations of SEW appear individualised.

Health professionals demonstrated a tendency to dislike the use of SEW in both German and Australian contexts, which contradicts the correlation previously observed between SEW usage and health professionals (Helmbrecht 2015). Du Bois (2012) notes that the use of SEW is a stigmatised language variable, particularly in a health-professional context. He further notes that in German, the use of SEW by nurses and doctors is uncommon, since health professionals are advised against it. This is due to the association of SEW with child-directed speech, for which reason it is viewed as inappropriate in conversations with adults, including seniors (Du Bois 2012). One German participant pointed out that he was advised to avoid the use of SEW during his internship, underscoring the heightened awareness of SEW among health professionals. Most German participants strongly rejected the use of SEW in a health professional context. However, considering that many Australians reacted indifferently towards the use of SEW in a health professional context, SEW may be used less problematically within Australian healthcare contexts.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper adds to sociolinguistic studies of pronouns and specifically the under-researched area of SEW. Existing studies on SEW have primarily focused on the use of this pronoun form in a healthcare context. My study has attempted to address the need to draw attention to the increased use of SEW in casual settings, specifically in the context of Australian English. By comparing both quantitative and qualitative data in a German and Australian context, this study has demonstrated some social meanings associated with SEW. Overall, both German and Australian participants highlighted the controversial connotations associated with SEW. In a German context, the use of 'Sie' persists to mediate social distance and respect, while SEW was mostly accepted by the participants within an intimate context (e.g., among friends). In the same vein, the Australian participants appeared to be familiar with the use of SEW in a friendly context, yet also accepted SEW in more formal contexts, due to its indirect and inclusive characteristics. This research may lead to a more nuanced understanding of communication in both casual and healthcare settings within an intercultural context (Australia and Germany). Moreover, this project could potentially lead to the promotion of better, more patient-centred practices in health practitioners' use of the pronouns.

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## Appendix A

### Survey questions about participants' own language use

#### SECTION 1: Questions about participant's own language use

1. I am most likely to use the speaker-exclusive pronoun 'we' (e.g., in a question like "How are we doing?") when talking to my (select as many answers as applicable).

- Colleagues
- Employees
- Employer
- None of the above
- Other

2. I would use speaker-exclusive 'we' when talking to friends.

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- Never

3. I am more likely to use speaker-exclusive 'we' in interaction with (select as many answers as applicable)

- Someone that I have known for a longer period of time (e.g., friends)
- Someone that I have known for a shorter period of time (someone I recently met)
- Other

4. I am more likely to use speaker-exclusive 'we' in interaction with (select as many answers as applicable)

- Someone who identifies with the same gender as myself
- Someone who identifies with a gender other than my own
- Other

5. I am more likely to use speaker-exclusive 'we' in interaction with (select one or more answers)

- Children (aged 0–12)
- Teenagers (aged 13–17)
- Adults (aged 18–65)
- Adults (aged 66 and older)
- Other

6. I am most likely to use speaker-exclusive 'we'...

(rank in order of frequency where  
1 = least frequent and 4 = most frequent)

- when stating something about someone else ( e.g., instead of saying “you are hungry” → “we are hungry”).
- when exclaiming (e.g., instead of saying “Oh, you need to catch the bus!” → “Oh, we need to catch the bus!”).
- when asking a question (e.g., instead of asking “How are you feeling?” → “How are we feeling?”).
- when telling someone to do something (e.g., instead of saying “You need to hurry up” → “We need to hurry up!”).

## SECTION 2: Scenarios concerning participant's own language use

7. Scenario 1: Imagine you work in health care and you are meeting a patient at work. What will you be likely to say? (tick all answers that are applicable).

- “How are you feeling?”
- “How are we feeling?”
- Other

8. Scenario 2: Imagine you work in retail (e.g., in a supermarket or bakery) and you are greeting a customer. What will you be likely to say? (Tick all answers that are applicable.)

- “How are you going?”
- “How are we going?”
- Other

9. Scenario 3: You are meeting up with a friend for a coffee. What will you be likely to say? (Tick all answers that are applicable.)

- “How have we been?”
- “How have you been?”
- Other

**Appendix B**

## Matched Guise Test stimuli

<b>Matched Guise Test stimuli: English</b>	<b>Matched Guise Test Stimuli: German</b>
Speaker 1: How are we doing today? Speaker 2: Not too bad, thanks	Sprecher 1: Wie geht es uns heute? Sprecher 2: Nicht schlecht, danke
Speaker 1: How are you doing today? Speaker 2: Not too bad, thanks	Sprecher 1: Wie geht es dir heute? Sprecher 2: Nicht schlecht, danke
Speaker 1: How are we feeling today? Speaker 2: Not too good, I have a bit of a headache	Sprecher 1: Wie geht es uns heute? Sprecher 2: Nicht so gut, ich habe Kopfschmerzen
Speaker 1: How are you feeling today? Speaker 2: Not too good, I have a bit of a headache	Sprecher 1: Wie geht es Ihnen heute? Sprecher 2: Nicht so gut, ich habe Kopfschmerzen