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Europe

**German linguistic correctness**  
**The du und du waltz**

Nov 26th 2009 | BERLIN  
From *The Economist* print edition

**The complex etiquette of du and Sie in Germany**



Reuters

"AT 2.12 our work was finished. At 2.15 we called each other Horst and Guido. This is the beginning of a great friendship." That is how Guido Westerwelle, the Free Democratic leader in Germany's coalition government, broke the news that he and Horst Seehofer of the Christian Social Union would henceforth address each other by the familiar *du* rather than the formal *Sie*. Since Mr Seehofer had called Mr Westerwelle a crybaby just weeks earlier, it was a touching reconciliation. But how much warmth does the intimate *du* convey?

**With all du respect**

It started with 1968ers who impudently called their professors *du*. Later generations of students reverted to *Sie*. But with each other, indeed with everyone of student age, *du* predominates. Bouncers at Berlin's clubs are *gesiezt* but bartenders are *geduzt*. Shoppers at upmarket KaDeWe are *Sie* but in shops packed with young Germans even those not so youthful may be called *du*. Annett Louisan, a pop singer, laments the passing of *Sie*: "This distance adds a little more/to something that would be a bore/What can I do for *Sie*?/stimulates wild fantasy."

It used to be so simple. Relatives, friends, children and dogs were *du*; everyone else was *Sie*. The offer of *du*, usually by an older interlocutor, was not made lightly. But this formula has become scrambled during the past 40 years. Germany is not America, where everyone is on first-name terms except in the doctor's surgery. The rules are now confusing, so that instead of guarding the borders between friendship and acquaintance, *Sie* and *du* often now smuggle coded messages across them.

In less erotically charged settings *Sie* holds sway. Banks, law firms and ministries remain bastions of *Sie*, though egalitarian companies like Sweden's IKEA have converted to *du*. It is easier to sack a *Sie* than a *du*. Sometimes *du* can even be dangerous: try it on a policeman and you may end up paying a fine for insulting

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Have some practice with using *Sie* and *du*, courtesy of the BBC.

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an officer.

Politics has its own rules. In the Social Democratic Party (SPD) it would be an insult to *siezen* a "comrade". Communists in East Germany were *du* to each other, which gives it a sinister ring to some *Ossis*. In conservative circles and across party lines *du* is not yet automatic. Angela Merkel, the Christian Democratic chancellor, never said *du* to Frank-Walter Steinmeier, her SPD foreign minister, though she apparently already does so to his successor, Mr Westerwelle.

In Mr Seehofer's case, as the older man, he almost certainly made the first move with Mr Westerwelle. But that has not stopped him repeatedly sniping at the new foreign minister. In this case *du* seems less a profession of friendship than a screen for hostility.

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