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*Variation*



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## MS. AS A COURTESY TITLE: VARIATION THROUGH TIME AND SPACE

DONNA L. LILLIAN  
*East Carolina University*

DURING THE 1970s, feminists promoted the use of *Ms.* as a courtesy title for women, with the intention that it become a replacement for both *Miss* and *Mrs.* and be used in a manner parallel to *Mr.*, revealing nothing about a person's marital or family status. While many women did adopt *Ms.* for themselves and many people undertook to use *Ms.* when addressing women, the term has never been consistently used or understood as it was intended. A 1986 survey of 325 people showed that many people resisted using *Ms.*, and when they did use it, they seldom used it as it had been intended (Atkinson 1987).<sup>1</sup> Instead, it was used only for certain sub-categories of women, such as young career-oriented women and divorced women. A subsequent survey of 247 participants (Lillian 1995) revealed that *Ms.* was most consistently used of older women, of lesbians, and of separated or divorced women. In 1986, 20% of women reported that they always or often used *Ms.* of themselves, while in 1995 that figure had risen to only 23%.

The present paper reports on a new study, currently underway. Making use of technology not previously available, this study gathers survey data on-line as well as through traditional paper surveys, thus allowing me to collect data from a wider geographical area. Whereas *Ms.* was once closely associated with feminists and with the feminist movement, I predict that it no longer carries a strong feminist connotation. Rather, as a result of the conservative backlash against feminism during the 1990s and into the new millennium, preliminary results suggest that *Ms.* has largely been co-opted by the mainstream and turned into a tool for more precisely identifying a woman's marital status, rather than as a tool for avoiding identification of a woman's marital status through courtesy titles.

1. PREVIOUS STUDIES. Most studies of *Ms.* have looked at people's perceptions or stereotypes of women who use *Ms.* and at self-reporting on whether people use *Ms.* of themselves. Collectively, these studies reveal a widespread perception that women who use *Ms.* are more career-oriented, assertive, independent, and feminist than their counterparts who use *Miss* or *Mrs.* (see Atkinson 1987, Connor *et al.* 1986, Davy 1978, Dion 1987, Dion & Cota 1991, Dion & Schuller 1990 and 1991, Feather *et al.* 1979, Heilman 1975, Jacobson & Insko 1984). In the largest study to date, and the only one which explicitly looks at data by race, Murray (1997) reports that while White respondents stereotype women who use *Ms.* as independent, unfriendly, unattractive, feminist, outspoken, unlikely to make a good wife or mother, prone to work outside the home, not as apt to enjoy cooking or going to church, African American respondents do not see any difference between women addressed with *Ms.* and women addressed with *Miss* or *Mrs.*

Of those people who used *Ms.* at least some of the time, many report that they use it primarily in business contexts, particularly when they do not know the marital status of the woman they are addressing, and that they use *Miss* or *Mrs.* in other situations. Given these findings, the survey reported on in Lillian (1995) was framed within a business context. Subjects were given brief descriptions of 15 women customers and were instructed to select from the choices listed how they would address a letter to the customer. All selections included a choice between *Ms.*, *Miss* and *Mrs.*, and some also included variations in surnames, as illustrated by the following sample scenario.

(1) **Elaine Parker is a 35-year-old lawyer, married to Alex Wilson.** (Circle one.)

Miss Parker	Ms. Parker	Mrs. Parker
Miss Wilson	Ms. Wilson	Mrs. Wilson

The attributes given for the women in the scenarios included variations in age, marital status, real or perceived feminist affiliation, sexual orientation, and employment status. The prediction was that if *Ms.* were favoured in business and if it were being used and understood as feminists had intended, then all answers to all scenarios should have been *Ms.* The 247 participants each responded to 15 scenarios, yielding a total of 3705 possible uses of *Ms.* There were, however, just 2058 actual uses of *Ms.*, for an overall total of 55.5% of answers using *Ms.* The comments of the subjects reveal a range of understandings of how to use courtesy titles, but a recurring theme suggests that *Mrs.* functions as a badge of honour, signaling married status, and that it is therefore preferred over *Ms.* for married women. Apparently, being married is still the most valued status for women and many of them want to advertise it through their use of courtesy titles. Overall, the data suggest that people employ a three-way distinction among courtesy titles for women, with *Miss* marking the woman as young and available, *Mrs.* as currently married, and *Ms.* as any other status, including separated, divorced, widowed, living common-law, and for some people, lesbian, or young and unmarried. In Lillian (1995), the most notable change from Atkinson (1987) is that women using *Ms.* are no longer stereotyped as young. Rather, they are generally deemed to be older, although there is no general agreement on exactly what age constituted older.

2. THE SURVEY. The current study uses a questionnaire very similar to that used in Lillian (1995). The 15 scenarios are the same, but the direct elicitation section includes more questions about the subjects' own background, including questions about age, sex, sexual orientation, race, religion, marital status, occupation, and place of residence. It also includes direct questions about subjects' use and understanding of *Ms.* and their views of feminism, and asks how they feel about the preference by some people to do away with courtesy titles completely in favour of just using addressees' first and last names. The latter question was included because a subset of respondents in both Atkinson (1987) and Lillian (1995) reported such a preference. In the present paper, I have not yet analyzed the qualitative data on feminism or the preference not to use any titles, although a preliminary examination of the data suggests that a majority of people still favour at least some use of courtesy titles.

Scenario	1995	2006	Pilot	Female	Male	Fem.	Non-Fem.
n=	247	2158	49	1472	306	978	982
#1 (23, student, common-law)	59.5	80.1	69.3	81.1	76.8	89.0	74.7
#2 (35, lawyer, married, kept surname)	38.0	66.9	8.1	69.8	56.8	78.2	62.8
#3 (19, single mom, no partner)	62.3	82.3	73.4	83.2	79.1	90.3	76.9
#4 (38, homemaker, married, 3 kids)	18.2	36.5	6.1	37.7	10.3	49.6	29.4
#5 (17, high school, lives with parents)	28.3	43.4	32.6	43.3	46.7	54.2	36.9
#6 (57, widow, shelter volunteer)	43.7	50.9	42.8	51.4	50.3	61.3	44.1
#7 (married, hyphenated surname)	22.2	50.7	8.1	52.2	45.5	64.3	47.6
#8 (42, stock broker, lesbian)	72.8	90.5	81.6	91.9	84.4	95.8	88.3
#9 (63, retired teacher, never married)	63.1	78.5	79.5	79.6	74.2	86.6	74.1
#10 (27, heavy equipment operator)	65.5	84.7	77.5	85.8	81.7	91.6	80.6
#11 (43, common-law, kids, hyphenated)	56.6	82.9	61.2	86.1	76.6	90.3	81.9
#12 (29, single, bank, will keep name)	67.6	84.9	69.3	86.3	80.4	92.3	81.4
#13 (83, living alone)	69.6	81.8	85.7	83.0	77.5	87.1	78.3
#14 (34, separated, resumed birth name)	81.7	92.1	81.6	93.9	86.9	96.4	90.6
#15 (52, divorced, feminist activist)	83.4	93.0	81.6	94.4	87.9	96.9	90.4
<b>Total (all scenarios, all subjects)</b>	55.5	73.8	57.2	74.6	67.6	81.6	69.2

**Table 1.** Percent of Answers Using Ms.

In order to obtain a wider sample of respondents, I created an online version of the survey, using the SurveyMonkey web site ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). I advertised the survey on a number of academic listservs, including those of The Linguist List, IGALA (International Gender and Language), FLING (Feminists in Linguistics), and the American Name Society. In addition, I sent an email notice to all of my email correspondents, encouraging them to answer the survey themselves and to circulate it to as many other people as they could. Within the first three weeks, I had collected 2158 responses and it is on those responses that the current paper reports. Respondents to the on-line survey come from around the world, although most are from North America. Not all 2158 respondents answered every question, so when subsets of the data are analyzed, the numbers do not always add up to 2158. For example, 1472 people identified themselves as female and 306 as male, which means that fully 380 people did not identify as either.

3. RESULTS. **Table 1** shows the percentage of responses using *Ms.* in Lillian (1995) and in the current study. The column labeled 2006 gives the total figures, which are then broken down in subsequent columns into figures for subjects identifying as female, male, feminist

and non-feminist. When the 2006 totals for the 15 scenarios are compared directly to the totals from Lillian (1995), several patterns emerge. Overall, use of *Ms.* in these scenarios has risen from 55.5% to 73.8%, an increase of 18.3%. In fact, for every scenario, there has been an increase in use of *Ms.*, ranging from 7.2% for scenario #7, up to 28.9% for scenario #2. The three scenarios showing the highest rate of increase, at 28.9%, 28.5% and 26.3%, respectively, are #2, involving a 35-year-old lawyer who married and kept her own surname, #7, involving a married woman who hyphenates her surname, and #11, involving a 43-year-old with children, living common-law, with a hyphenated surname. Atkinson (1987) found a positive correlation between women who retained all or part of their surname and those who used *Ms.*, and the data for scenarios #2, #7, and #11 suggest that this tendency is continuing and even strengthening. Nevertheless, while these scenarios show the highest rates of increase, they do not represent the highest overall use of *Ms.* in the data.

The ranking among the scenarios in terms of rates of *Ms.*-use changed between 1995 and 2006, but scenarios #15, #14, and #8 continue to be ranked 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Fully 93.0% of people used *Ms.* for #15, a 52-year-old divorced feminist activist, 92.1% used *Ms.* for #14, a 34-year-old who separated from her husband and then resumed using her birth name, and 90.5% used *Ms.* for #8, a 42-year-old lesbian stockbroker. The fact that two of these three involve separation or divorce confirms earlier findings that people often consider *Ms.* appropriate for divorced or separated women. Since being a lesbian is also part of the stereotype of women who use *Ms.*, these findings tend to confirm that. The next highest ranked scenarios in 2006 are #12 (29-year-old, single, bank employee) at 84.9% and #10 (27-year-old, single, heavy equipment operator) at 84.7% (ranked 5th and 6th in 1995, behind scenario #13). At first this finding may seem surprising, given that Lillian (1995) found that *Ms.*-users were stereotyped as being older, but qualitative data suggest that there is still a prevailing expectation that women will marry in their early 20's, so women in their late 20's who are independent and single may fit the popular criteria for use of *Ms.*

Equally instructive are the scenarios in which subjects show the lowest rates of use of *Ms.* In both 1995 and 2006, scenario #4 yielded the lowest rates of *Ms.*-use (18.2% and 36.5%, respectively). This scenario describes a 38-year-old woman who is married with 3 children and who is a full-time homemaker. Overwhelmingly, people use *Mrs.* as the preferred address form for her. This woman fills the idealized role of stay-at-home mom and appears to be as far from the stereotype of independence and feminism associated with *Ms.* as one is likely to get. Time after time, both in formal surveys and in informal discussions with non-academics, people report just such a role as the quintessential accomplishment for women, to be recognized and signaled by the use of the honorific *Mrs.* The 14th-ranked scenario (ranked 13th in 1995) was #5, involving the 17-year-old high school student. In general, respondents tend to address her using *Miss*, perhaps both because of her age and her single status. Scenarios #6 and #7 were very close at 50.9% and 50.7% respectively. In #6, the woman's status as a widow seems, on the one hand, to suggest conformity with the norms for women to marry and this is expressed through a high rate of use of *Mrs.* for her, and on the other hand to suggest that her status as no longer married makes her similar to divorced or separated women. Her age, 57, may also have influenced people to use *Ms.* for her, a point which is addressed below, when the independent variable age is discussed. In

scenario #7 the woman is married but has hyphenated her name. This apparent conflict between the traditionalism of marriage and the non-traditionalism of *Ms.*-use may explain the split result in this scenario.

On their own, the mid-ranked scenarios show nothing particularly remarkable. More interesting are the results when the responses of males and females are compared to one another and to the aggregate results. The results for males are lower than those for females for every scenario except #5, the 17-year-old high school student, for which males use *Ms.* at a rate of 46.7%, while females use it at a rate of just 43.3%. My preliminary examination of the data has not revealed any conclusive reason for this difference, but it may be that for males, the feature of singleness slightly outweighs that of age. Apart from this difference, there is consistency between males and females in their ranking of the scenarios, and the ranking corresponds closely with that observed above for the aggregate data. Specifically, the highest-ranked scenarios are #15, #14, and #8, and the lowest-ranked is #4, with #5, #6, and #7 in the next 3 positions. The higher rate of *Ms.*-use by females may suggest that as women, the option of using *Ms.* has greater significance or usefulness than it has for men. Further examination of the qualitative data may reveal more robust explanations.

It is not surprising that feminists use *Ms.* at a higher rate than non-feminists, namely 81.6% versus 69.2%, given that *Ms.* was originally a feminist linguistic innovation and it still carries positive feminist connotations for at least some people. Feminists use *Ms.* more than non-feminists in every scenario, but there is one minor shift in ranking from the order seen in all the other data thus far. Specifically, for non-feminists, scenario #14 narrowly edged out #15 for the top-ranked spot (90.6% versus 90.4%). Once the data gathering has been completed and tests for statistical significance have been carried out, this difference may prove insignificant. Of greater interest, perhaps, is the high level of consistency in the rankings of the other scenarios. Once again, #15, #14, and #8 are the top three, and #4, #5, #6, and #7 are the lowest ranked (in that order, from lowest upward).

**Table 2** (overleaf) shows the rates of use of *Ms.* by age category of subjects. Subjects were asked to identify their age according to one of the following age groupings; 16–19, 20–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69, 70–79, 80+. There is a lot of disparity in the numbers of respondents in each age category, with a particular shortage of older respondents in the 70–79 group (22 respondents) and in the 80+ group (3 respondents). Continued data gathering will focus on recruiting more participants from these age groups. Meanwhile, even allowing for the small amount of data for these groups, an interesting pattern of age grading is revealed by the data. The overall rate of use of *Ms.* rises with each age category, peaking with the age 50–59 group and then falling off in each successive group. The figures by decade are 59.5%, 68.8%, 74.1%, 78.4%, 80.8%, 76.8%, 66.7% and 60%. This rising and falling pattern is imitated, with only small deviations, for every individual scenario. For scenarios #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, #10, #11, #14, and #15, the peak is with the 50–59 year-olds, with the drop beginning with the 60–69's. For #8 (lesbian stockbroker) the pattern peaks with the 40–49's and drops slightly beginning with the 50–59's. For scenario #12 (29, single, bank employee), the pattern peaks with the 60–69's, then drops with the next group. For scenario #13, the drop begins earlier, with the 30–39 group. Respondents' reluctance to use *Ms.* for this 83-year-old living alone may be consistent with their experience of older women often preferring

Scenario	16-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+
<b>n=</b>	67	627	549	332	306	146	22	3
#1 (23, student, common-law)	61.2	75.1	80.6	84.3	88.2	87.0	81.8	66.7
#2 (35, lawyer, married, kept surname)	35.8	54.4	70.3	78.2	82.1	80.1	59.1	0.0
#3 (19, single mom, no partner)	58.2	76.4	82.6	87.9	90.9	90.4	86.4	66.7
#4 (38, homemaker, married, 3 kids)	14.9	25.5	39.1	47.4	50.0	40.4	31.8	0.0
#5 (17, high school, lives with parents)	25.4	36.5	43.4	50.2	56.2	47.3	36.4	33.3
#6 (57, widow, shelter volunteer)	43.3	47.2	51.6	54.4	58.2	49.3	45.5	33.3
#7 (married, hyphenated surname)	25.4	35.8	52.0	62.2	71.9	58.3	45.4	33.3
#8 (42, stock broker, lesbian)	79.1	88.5	90.5	94.3	93.2	91.8	90.9	100.0
#9 (63, retired teacher, never married)	82.1	81.7	81.0	77.6	74.2	71.9	54.5	66.7
#10 (27, heavy equipment operator)	65.7	82.5	83.8	90.0	91.8	89.0	72.7	100.0
#11 (43, common-law, kids, hyphenated)	77.7	80.1	82.3	90.7	91.8	87.7	86.3	33.3
#12 (29, single, bank, will keep name)	65.7	82.9	84.3	89.7	90.8	91.1	68.2	66.7
#13 (83, living alone)	83.6	84.2	85.4	80.4	78.1	76.0	63.6	100.0
#14 (34, separated, resumed birth name)	86.6	90.2	92.5	95.6	96.8	96.6	86.4	100.0
#15 (52, divorced, feminist activist)	88.1	91.7	93.1	93.4	97.7	95.6	90.9	100.0
<b>Total (all scenarios, all subjects)</b>	59.5	68.8	74.1	78.4	80.8	76.8	66.7	60.0

**Table 2.** Percent of Answers Using *Ms.*, by Age

either *Miss* or *Mrs.*, in accordance with what they see as traditional usage. It is possible that some similar judgement is being made with respect to the 63-year-old never-married retired school teacher in scenario #9. In what is a reversal of the trend otherwise noted, the youngest age group was the most likely to address her using *Ms.* with each subsequent age group less and less likely to use *Ms.* for her.

The fact that the highest rates of *Ms.*-use occur in the 50-59 age bracket is perhaps not surprising. These people were, after all, in young adulthood when feminists began popularizing *Ms.* They were in on the ground floor, as it were, in spreading the use of *Ms.*, and even if they did not all embrace it for themselves, they were the most likely group to understand its original, intended meaning. The fact that use of *Ms.* decreases as one looks at younger and younger age brackets could mean one of two things. On the one hand, it could suggest that feminists are losing ground with respect to having *Ms.* take over and replace both *Miss* and *Mrs.* This hypothesis gains some support from the fact that the 1995 and 2006 figures for 16-19 year-olds are fairly close (55.5% and 59.5% respectively). These figures are also close to those obtained in a 2006 pilot test of the questionnaire using 49 undergraduate students as respondents. The pilot group had an overall rate of 57.2% *Ms.*-use for the 15



scenarios. On the other hand, even for the youngest groups in 2006, rates of use of *Ms.* are still higher than the overall figures were in 1995. Thus, an alternative explanation might be that some of the issues raised by the use of *Ms.* become more relevant as one moves through adulthood and are the most salient when one is at the peak of one's career. Thus, as people mature they might see more use for the term *Ms.* and they might increase their use of it. Follow-up studies in the coming decades will resolve these questions more conclusively, but in the interim, analysis of the qualitative data gathered in the current survey may shed further light on the question of why there is such a marked pattern of age ranking.

4. CONCLUSION. The results of the present study are still preliminary, since data gathering is continuing at the time of this writing. When the data are complete, the analysis will include an examination of possible effects of nationality, region, and ethnicity, as well as the variables of age, sex, and feminist orientation discussed here. All the quantifiable data will be subjected to tests for statistical significance and the qualitative data will be analyzed and interpreted. Thus, all conclusions at this juncture are preliminary and may be subject to subsequent reinterpretation. Nevertheless, even with those caveats, it is possible to make some preliminary observations about the use of *Ms.* First, although overall rates of *Ms.*-use have increased over the decade between 1995 and 2006, women are still more likely than men to address women using *Ms.*, feminists are more likely than non-feminists to address women using *Ms.*, and people in their middle years are more likely than either younger or older people to address women using *Ms.* Second, there is a high degree of consistency across age, sex, and feminist orientation categories in terms of the characteristics likely to induce people to address a woman using *Ms.* Specifically, a woman is more likely to be addressed with *Ms.* if she is divorced, separated, or widowed, if she is a lesbian, or if she is single and past the age of about 25. A woman will seldom be addressed as *Ms.* if she is a married homemaker living a stereotypically traditional lifestyle. In fact, the scenario describing such a woman is consistently ranked lowest by all demographic groups examined. Other low-ranking scenarios involve a married woman, a widow, and a single teenager.

Feminists introduced *Ms.* as a term to be parallel to *Mr.*, to be used for all women, regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, marital status, or political affiliation. Almost since its beginnings, *Ms.* has met with opposition. Part of the opposition may be due to a form of linguistic conservatism, a curmudgeonliness about any observable changes in the language. However, in spite of a general reticence on the part of some people to alter traditional address forms, *Ms.* is being used at an increasing rate. Unfortunately, it is being used in a manner that is almost the complete opposite of its intended usage. Instead of eliminating personal information about a woman's marital status in her courtesy title, *Ms.*, as it is currently being used, actually increases the amount of personal information being disclosed about a woman. Clearly, society still places a very high premium on disclosing personal details about a woman's status in the world, while still apparently maintaining the double standard that allows men to conceal all such details through the common designation, *Mr.*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was published under my former surname, Atkinson. In 1990, I legally changed my surname to Lillian, in honour of my grandmother, Lillian Alice (Meades) Atkinson.

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