

SHIFT OF USE OF CAPITAL (UPPER CASE) LETTERS IN ENGLISH AND LATVIAN MARKETING TEXTS

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Abstract. This paper is largely observational. It discusses shifts in capitalization practices in marketing texts in Latvian. Two of the observed shifts are changes in accepted Latvian orthography (in Latvian texts) and one is an extension of Latvian changes into English texts written in Latvia. One of the Latvian shifts may be due to external influence and one is from internal sources. These changes are considered as matters of orthographic change, cultural change, the introduction of new (or previously little utilized) communication channels and tools and demonstration of the evolution of new communication rules. The paper provides some hypotheses about what may cause this and makes some observations about what this reflects about culture and language and how these are applied to other languages.

Keywords: capitalization, orthography, language change, Latvian, English

Introduction

This paper discusses some unusual uses of capital letters in several situations in various marketing texts. Marketing texts (that is a wider and different notion from advertising texts) were chosen as they exhibit shifts in capitalization and this suggests a pattern and not just arbitrary changes of the existent norms. The first is a change from formally accepted Latvian orthography in the use of personal pronouns. The second is a reflection of the first in the use of capital letters in pronouns in English texts written in Latvia. The third usage change is taking English capitalization norms and using them in Latvian when they violate norms of Latvian orthography. These changes are observed in Latvian and English marketing texts written in Latvia.

Slipping out of the norm and then in some cases eventually changing it, are caused by new functions of communication and changing environment where several languages interplay. New functions of using capital letters are born of the need to assign new meaning and weight to specific words and concepts in marketing and advertising texts (that are rather new themselves in the Latvian language context). The changes of the language environment are mostly due to a closer interaction of the Latvian and English languages since the beginning of the 1990s. English is actively used in business communication. Sometimes the innovative use of the capital letter is overuse of an already existent norm in Latvian and sometimes it is adopted from an English convention. This process affects both English and Latvian usage as sometimes the new capitalization standards or the norms of Latvian are shifted to the English texts produced by authors whose first language is not English. This shift is based on the assumption that what works in one language must work in another as well disregarding the fact that any language is culturally laden and also norms of orthography carry meaning.

In this paper the terms *capital* and *upper case letters* are used interchangeably and are assumed to have the same meaning. This paper deals only with words where the first letter is capitalized as opposed to words with all upper case use.

1. Overuse of capitalization in personal pronouns in Latvian

A well-manifested change in the capitalization paradigm is overusing of capital letter for the second person plural pronoun *you*. The capitalized *you* is now used in practically all marketing texts – direct and public (Kotler 2006: 537), though its use in public marketing is not consistent with the norms of Latvian orthography.

In the Latvian language there are 2 forms of the 2nd person singular personal pronoun – the real singular *tu* and plural *jūs*. The plural form is used both for addressing several people and when addressing a single person with a need to show respect, formality and/or seniority. This norm is present in many European languages. The norm as suggested by standard textbooks of Latvian orthography is that second person plural pronoun is capitalized in personal writing (letters, invitations, etc.); thus, the use of capitalized *tu* and *jūs* in all case forms is expected only in a limited range of writing – personal letters, invitations, and applications. This is done to show respect and demonstrate formality to the person addressed and “to honour the addressee” (Romane 2000: 59). The authors of a manual of use of Latvian for written communication “Turi pa rokai, iemet aci” published in Canada in 1997, stress differentiation between capitalized and non-capitalized 2nd person pronoun (both singular and plural). They instruct that capitalized pronoun be applied only for a person in singular (Muižniece *et al.* 1997: 103). The same norm is recently reinforced by the authors of the manual of orthography where the authors specially indicate that personal pronouns *tu* and *jūs* and possessive pronouns *tavs*, *jūsu* (when they refer to a person in singular) in letters are written with a capital initial letter, for example, *sūtu Tev sveicienus; gaidu Jūsu atbildi; pateicos par Tavu sūtījumu* (Guļevska *et al.* 2002: 122–123). In practice, exactly when 2nd person pronoun is capitalized is a slightly elusive matter – each author chooses to use upper case letter when he/she assigns enough worth to the person addressed.

The capitalized 2nd person pronoun is a functional norm in many kinds of public (as opposed to direct) marketing and advertising writing. In contemporary marketing texts (bank brochures, leaflets, ads in printed media, web sites of companies and banks) this pronoun practically always appears in upper case when addressing a potential client, who is important but still anonymous (not personally known to the writer of the text). There seems to be no difference between texts that are addressed to many (and no one at the same time) and direct mailing which whenever possible has a concrete addressee.

(1a)

Uzņēmēja komplekts ir:

ekonomisks – *Jūs* ietaupīsiet līdzekļus, vienkopus iegādājoties pakalpojumus, kuru atsevišķa iegāde izmaksātu dārgāk;

efektīvs – lielāko daļu pakalpojumu *Jūs* varēsiet izmantot jau dažu stundu laikā pēc pieteikšanās... (Source: bank materials – a printed leaflet; *emphasis added*)

Translation into English:

Business services complex is:

economical – *You* will save money by getting a set of services that if purchased separately would cost more;

effective – *You* will be able to use most of these services within a few hours after applying... (Source: bank materials – a printed leaflet; *emphasis added*)

This text (1a) is from a bank brochure informing potential clients about the services of a service bundle for enterprise bank accounts.

The interplay between 2nd person singular and plural form is interesting as well. To gain more personalization, some marketing texts use singular *tu* instead of *jūs*. This is done to stress interest, personalization, friendship and closeness (e.g. – we like you, we are pals, look, what we've got for you here!).

(1b)

Drīzumā Valsts kases darbība pensiju 2. līmeņa pārvaldē tiks izbeigta. Ir pēdējais brīdis *Tev* pašam izvēlēties, kur uzkrāt savu pensiju. (Source: bank materials – a printed leaflet; *emphasis added*)

Translation into English:

State Treasury management of the second pension level is coming to an end. It is high time for *You* (2nd person singular) yourself to choose where to save your pension. (Source: bank materials – a printed leaflet; *emphasis added*).

This text (1b) is about pension plan availability and advantages provided by the new asset management company.

There is an interesting discourse in the society concerning these forms: many people perceive the plural form as a norm when talking to anyone unfamiliar, not to speak of people who are higher in the hierarchy or senior. It is curious that these forms – either singular or plural – carry very strong connotation. Even though usually the singular form is an expression of trust, friendship, liking, its use in

some contexts is viewed as rude, for example, two people who are not known to each other (one usually younger than the other) arguing in public transportation, where use of plural is traditionally socially expected. The same shift is possible also within the use of the plural form, which by definition implies respect. Still, by using *jūs* people very often show reservation, resentment, differentiation, sometimes also signalling power and status difference. Geert Hofstede defines power distance “as the degree of inequality among people which the population of a country considers as normal: from relatively equal (that is, small power distance) to extremely unequal (large power distance)” (Hofstede 1993: 89). There has been no research on power distance in Latvia, but work in Lithuania suggests that Lithuania has medium power distance (Baltrimiene 2005). Given the similarities between Lithuania and Latvia, probably Latvia has like power distance. It seems reasonable to assume that the strict differentiation in the language between singular and plural personal addresses indicates higher rather than lower power distance.

Though many people expect to be addressed in the plural form by a stranger (be it a person or a business), some marketers are courageous enough to use the singular form both in their oral and written materials.

When analysing the subject, a survey was distributed to learn respondents' preference regarding the use of *tu* vs. *jūs* and in case *jūs* was chosen, whether it should be capitalized. The age of the respondents is between 14 and 45; they are from secondary school students to people with completed higher education. 120 surveys were distributed via email and 60 were returned for a response rate of 50%. A significant majority (40 of 60) answered that they still expect to be addressed in the plural form. There was no age difference in the responses – both adults and teenagers answered that plural form is the appropriate one to be used in the marketing text. In comments to the survey, many respondents stressed that this is the way they address people and expect to be addressed by others whom they see for the first time or who are senior or perceived as respectable. 14 respondents (mostly men) said that it does not matter to them whether they are addressed by *tu* or *jūs*. Accordingly, only 6 respondents chose *tu* as a proper address form. In close parallel, most respondents (48 of 60) said that once *jūs* is used, it should also be capitalized. Several people first expressed their concerns of what is the correct/expected form. This implies that many people are rule and convention conscious and it is important for them to do the right thing. This is something marketers should pay attention to as well when deviating from the norm by adopting conventions from English: potential customers want to be treated the right way language wise as well.

Another trait of marketing texts in Latvian is shifting to more personalized, more dynamic expression. Thus the 3rd person usage has decreased in favour of 2nd person – instead of “the client, the customer” we see *you*. Though often this *you* is impersonal, it still gets treated as personal (by capitalizing it).

2. Bringing capitalization into English

The practice of using capitalized plural form of the personal pronoun is a culturally defined norm. These norms are very strong and very often almost unconscious; users perceive them as the only correct way there is. The use of one or the other form

is not only a rule of orthography but also culture expression. A project conducted by Radboud University (Nijmegen, the Netherlands) and Lessius Hogeschool in Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium) of intercultural business communication by email showed that even though the students from both countries share the same language, they demonstrate considerable cultural differences. Some of these are differences in power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, polychrony vs. monochrony, etc. Differences showed also in the use of 2nd person pronouns; a Dutch student in the first e-mail message addressed her Flemish counterpart using informal *you*, while the Flemish student uses the formal form. The authors of the project conclude that “this is not simply a question of superficial indications; it goes deep into the value-laden underground of one’s existence: something one sees only when confronted with it “on paper”” (Gerritsen, Verckens 2006: 55).

The variations in meanings and conventions are discussed in the article “Dear Friend“(?): Culture and Genre in American and Canadian Direct Marketing Letters” (Graves 1997) where the author compares direct marketing letters in USA and Canada. Both countries as in the case of Belgium and the Netherlands described above use the same language, but there are many historic, societal and cultural aspects that set the two countries apart and this difference is apparent in writing – both contents and form. On the contrary, we see mostly one-to-one alignment with the original Latvian text in many English marketing texts produced in Latvia.

In Latvian the use of capitalized *you* is brought over to marketing (and all kinds of informative) English texts created in Latvia by local authors. Even though capitalized *you* is used in some English advertisements produced in the UK, capitalized *you* in English is a violation of an English norm and appears faulty and confusing in an English text. Regardless of this and the fact that many of the texts are written or at least edited by people who have academic education in the English language (English philologists), this norm carried from the Latvian orthography prevails in the English texts. The overall quality of many texts suggests that this trend is not just ignorance and lack of knowledge, but an editorial policy of many companies and businesses.

Example (2a) is the text regarding the delivery of goods from an Internet shop in Latvia. Not only do the authors use capitalized *you*, but they also are not consistent about its use – in some places they use the upper case letter to begin the pronoun and in some other they do not. Comparing the English and the Latvian versions of the text, it is obvious that there are more *you* in the English translation: the Latvian text in the Example (2b) is basically 3rd person / impersonal (delivery of goods is possible, etc.) while in English a more personal voice is used by using *you*. There is the same possibility to use the 2nd person to express person neutral utterances by using 2nd person (Danielson, Porter 1990: 113–114). In this context capitalization is even more confusing – both in English and Latvian.

(2a)

1. Using the online shop ordering system.

This online shop system allows you to inspect the goods *You* have chosen, to enter delivery address, to chose the one of the delivery types. The delivery of the product is possible during 2-4 hours from the moment when *Your* order

is accepted in case if good is available in the warehouse. (Source: http://www.euroshop.lv/order_how/; *emphasis added*)

2. By free phone 800 06 00.

Tell the product *You* would like to buy, also tell desirable time and address of delivery. Our sales managers will consult *You* and register your order. The delivery of the product is possible during 2-4 hours from the moment when *Your* order is accepted in case if good is available in the warehouse. (Source: http://www.euroshop.lv/order_how/; *emphasis added*)

(2b)

1. Izmantojot Euroshop.lv iepirkšanās grozu.

Šī veikala sistēma *Jums* ļauj ielikt grozā vienu vai vairākas preces, apskatīties veiktos pirkumus, ievadīt līdz 5. piegādes adresēm, izvēlēties un norādīt piegāžu veidus. Preču piegāde iespējama 2-4 stundu laikā no pasūtījuma apstiprināšanas brīža, ja prece ir pieejama noliktavā. (Source: http://www.euroshop.lv/order_how/; *emphasis added*)

2. Izmantojot bezmaksas pasūtījumu tālruni 800 06 00.

Nosaucot savu vēlamu preci, piegādes laiku un vietu. Pārdošanas vadītāji *Jūs* konsultēs un reģistrēs *Jūsu* pasūtījumu. Preču piegāde iespējama 2-4 stundu laikā no pasūtījuma apstiprināšanas brīža, ja prece ir pieejama noliktavā. (Source: http://www.euroshop.lv/order_how/; *emphasis added*)

There is no consistency in the spelling of *you* with the capital letter as well (see the first instance of usage in 2a).

3. Specific vs. common nouns

Until relatively recently Russian was the major second language studied by Latvian speakers but now English is the most common second language (Bond *et al.* 2001). This suggests that English is the major intermediary language in Latvia, thus its impact on Latvian is inevitable. In English a common noun can be capitalized if it is specific as opposed to non-specific, e.g. god, God; project, Project; regulation(s), Regulation. The specified noun refers to the particular thing concerned vs. many others of the same category. This use of capitalized common nouns is a rather widespread practice in English. Example (3a) demonstrates this use.

(3a)

A description of The Visible Human Project® image data and how to obtain it (includes license agreement documents).

The Visible Human Project® FactSheet.

A sampler of images and animations from the *Project* (Source: http://www.nlm.nih.gov/research/visible/visible_human.html; *emphasis added*)

Some marketing and informative texts in Latvian have taken the English form of capitalising common nouns. This is done when referring to a specific project or event as opposed to any project or event. Common nouns in Latvian are capitalized

only in specific cases in titles and names of organisations and institutions. The rules are rather complex. Example (3b) demonstrates capitalization of a common noun *Pasākums* ‘event’ on a ticket to a concert, even though this does not add to the clarity of information – it is clear anyway that the ticket selling company assumes (limited) responsibility for and involvement only in the events it sells tickets for.

(3b)

SIA “Biļešu Paradīze” ir atbildīga tikai par biļešu pārdošanu. Nopirktās biļetes atpakaļ pieņem vai apmaina tikai *Pasākuma* atcelšanas un/vai pārceļšanas gadījumā, izņemot Patērētāju tiesību aizsardzības Likuma 34. panta 3. punktā noteiktos gadījumus. Par *Pasākuma* norisi pilnībā atbildīgs ir *Pasākuma* rīkotājs. Iekšējās kārtības noteikumus nosaka *Pasākuma* rīkotājs, saskaņā ar Civillikumu un sabiedrībā vispārpieņemtajām uzvedības normām. (Source: a ticket printed by “Biļešu Paradīze” ltd.; *emphasis added*)

Translation into English:

“Biļešu Paradīze” ltd. is only responsible for ticket sales. Tickets purchased are returned or exchanged only if the *Event* is cancelled or rescheduled, excluding reasons covered under paragraph 34, point 3 of the Consumer Protection Law. The organizer of the *Event* is completely responsible for *Event* procedures. The organizer of the *Event* is responsible to insure that the order and internal rules of the Event are in accordance with Civil Law and the accepted norms of society. (Source: a ticket printed by “Biļešu Paradīze” ltd.; *emphasis added*)

Spelling a common noun with a capital letter in the flow of the text is unaccustomed and confusing, as capitalization suggests a title or quality of a proper noun.

4. Capitalization in headings and titles

Another English use of upper case letters is in headings and titles. In English all words except short words (like *a*, *the*, *and*, *or*, *with*) are capitalized¹ while in Latvian only the first word of the heading and proper nouns are capitalized. Nowadays more and more samples of writing in Latvian have the English norm where every word gets capitalized.

(4)

Baltijas Nekustamā Īpašuma un Investīciju Konference
Reval Hotel Latvija, Rīga, 5.-6. Jūnijs (Source: newspaper publication of the real estate company Oberhaus)

Here every word of the title is written with upper case letters and in the additional information about the venue and place even the name of the month of June, which is never done in Latvian. This type of capitalization is more and more frequent in Latvian, as the authors evidently feel that English offers a uniform rule where nothing can go wrong and the possible reader is provided with the text of sufficient stress and importance.

¹ http://www.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g_caps.html (19.04.2006)

Conclusion

This paper presented a set of observations of orthography changes taking place in marketing texts produced in Latvian. One shows an internalization of English norms into Latvian and the other the absorption of Latvian norms in English language texts.

The use of capital (upper case) and small (lower case) letters forms the graphics of a text. Graphics of the text carries meaning just the same as the images, colours, layout and the actual words used in it. Voluntary changes of the expected graphics and/or orthography are unusual and confusing; they hinder perception of the text. The question of what these shifted and changed graphical representations really mean and communicate to the audience is still to be questioned and researched. Marketers should be aware that their texts may be perceived in a totally different way than they intend. The survey done with this study sustains the notion that Latvians expect what they believe is correct to be used and, by extension, they may not look kindly on deviations from the norm in marketing texts.

It is further suggested that these changes could easily be taken by readers (especially the young) as the norm and further replicated. It should be observed that because of its concrete existence on the printed page, written language has strength of permanence that spoken language may not have. So, spoken language allows more deviation.

We have to keep in mind that every norm is culturally laden and mechanical shifting of them from a language to language is at least counterproductive. As indicated in various sources, cultural differences and their representations can be disruptive (Gerritsen, Verckens 2006: 57). Therefore, people have to be aware and learn about intercultural differences and even more so people who advertise and market.

Language is a dynamic entity; it does change. Andrejs Veisbergs in his article "Where are you heading, Latvian?", suggests that there should be more flexibility in the way new tendencies and uses are elevated to the level of the norm (Veisbergs 2006: 2). He speaks mostly of vocabulary and spoken language; evidently changes in orthography take place over a longer period of time as their appearance in every individual case is an arbitrary decision. Even though some of the use decisions are arbitrary, we want to be aware of the process and the effects of the change.

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SUURTÄHTEDE KASUTUSE MUUTUS INGLISE JA LÄTI TURUNDUSTEKSTIDES

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Riia Tehnikaülikool

Artikkel on suuresti ülevaatlik, arutledes kapitalisatsiooni tava muutuste üle Läti turundustekstides. Täheldatud nihetest on kaks seotud muutustega läti ortograafias (läti keelsetes tekstides) ja üks läti ortograafia laienemisega Lätis kirjutatud ingliskeelsetesse tekstidesse. Artiklis kirjeldatud läti muutustest on üks väliselt mõjustatud, teine on tingitud sisemistest muutustest. Muutusi on vaadeldud kui ortograafia, kultuurilise muutuse, uute (või varem vähetarvitatud) kommunikatsioonikanalite ja -vahendite käibelevõtu ning uute kommunikatsioonireeglite arengut näitlikustavat küsimust. Artiklis esitatakse mõned hüpoteesid, mis nähtust võiks olla põhjustanud, ning tehakse üldistusi selle kohta, mida see peegeldab kultuuri ja keele kohta ning kuidas on mõjutanud teisi keeli.

Võtmesõnad: kapitalisatsioon, ortograafia, keelemuutused, läti keel, inglise keel