

A diachronic account of *usted* as a default 2SG pronoun in Colombian Spanish

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Cross-linguistic surveys reveal regularities in the repurposing of 2PL or 3SG personal pronouns to address a 2SG referent as a means of imbuing pronominal forms with honorific values (Comrie 1971, Corbett 2000:220-227, Head 1978). In the case of these pronouns, politeness is manifested in indirectness via the use of number and person mismatches—i.e. plural and/or third person—in reference to a singular addressee. The diachronic drift of polite pronouns to encroach on contexts typically covered by unmarked, informal 2SG alternatives, however, is a largely unexplored topic in the literature, despite synchronic cases—for instance, English *you* and Brazilian Portuguese *você*—in which once-deferential pronouns lost honorific value over time. In this study, I trace the development of the Spanish 2SG pronoun *vuestra merced* > *usted* in a corpus of personal letters¹ spanning the 16th-19th centuries and argue that its unmarked usage in contemporary Colombian Spanish parallels the non-deferential uses of 2SG *vos* in the 15th century prior to the conquest of the Americas.

Romance personal pronouns demonstrate a 2PL > 2SG-POL diachronic pathway, originating with the Latin etymon *VŌS* (Penny 2002:137-139, Pountain 2003). Synchronic evidence of this process in modern Romance is easily observed in French *vous*, in which the polysemy of 2PL and 2SG-POL values is preserved. The canonical form of Modern Spanish *usted* ‘2SG-POL’ originates by way of a metonymic expression, *vuestra merced* ‘your mercy’, in which the possessive pronoun *vuestra*, derived from *vos*, could point to either 2PL or 2SG-POL referents. Analogous constructions such as *vuestra señoría* ‘your lordship’ and *vuestra majestad* ‘your majesty’ coexisted with *vuestra merced* in the 15th century (Penny 2002: 138), indicating that the latter had not yet lexicalized but was rather interpreted in terms of both syntactic elements (i.e., 2PL/SG-POL.POSS + NP). Meanwhile, slippage in the honorific value of *vos* had already begun in the 12th century, when it was used in solidary and intimate contexts between individuals of high rank, spouses, and close family members; indeed, by the 15th century *vos* was used reciprocally in solidary relationships for individuals of all socioeconomic levels due to increased class mobility and fluidity (Díaz-Collazos 2015:36-60). Tuten (2006) suggests that developments in 16th century Spanish Peninsular society such as massive migrations to urban centers like Madrid and Sevilla and from the latter to the Spanish American colonies led to an analogous decoupling of *vuestra merced* from a strict honorific interpretation.

The present study advances a diachronic account of the development of *usted* as a default 2SG pronoun in Colombian varieties of Spanish. An analysis of second person address forms in private letters from 16th-19th c. New Granada provides evidence that non-deferential uses of *vuestra merced* > *usted*—such as between siblings, spouses, and cousins—were employed from the earliest period of colonization. These findings suggest that *usted* as a default pronoun of address is neither a recent innovation, nor specific to the Colombian context, as has been proposed previously.

¹ Letters were drawn from print sources (Macías & Morales 1991, Martínez 2007, Fernández 2009, and Otte 1996) as well as from original transcriptions of archival documents found in the “Latin American mss. --Colombia, 1558-1890” collection at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.

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