

SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCES IN THE USE OF COLOMBIAN PRONOUNS OF ADDRESS*

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This article reports on the status of the use of pronouns of address in the Spanish dialect of Santa Fe de Bogotá², Colombia, mainly with the purpose of documenting a process of change in the traditional use and connotation of the pronouns *tú* and *Usted*. Bogotá has a population of over seven million³, and constitutes the biggest urban center of the country (DANE, 2005). To this data, a non-governmental organization argues that approx 4,500 IDP⁴ arrive in Bogotá every month, though on the other hand, the Social Solidarity Network -a government body responsible for dealing with displacement in the country- estimates that this number is only closer to 1,000 (IDP Project, 2005). Therefore, calculations of the population size of the capital city may oscillate between eight and eleven million inhabitants, many of which were not born in the capital or belong to recently immigrated families. For this reason Bogotá is considered a metropolitan center that combines numerous walks of life, and therefore, diverse linguistic behaviors.

1. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Previous studies have offered different perspectives towards the analysis of the Spanish pronominal system. One of the earlier researchers, Kany (1945), adopts a historical perspective based in the review of literary works. According to Kany, *El Poema del Mio Cid* (1140) documents the use of *vos* as a pronoun that conveys

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² Hereof "Bogotá"

³ Projection to 2005 according to the 1993 census (PRESEEA-BOGOTÁ, 2004)

⁴ IDP is short for "internally displaced person".

respect among the members of a higher social class, while *tú* is reserved to address people of a lower social rank. Kany also points out that during the XV century there was a more frequent alternation between *vos* and *tú*, in which the use of *vos* implied a series of morphological variations, which in turn, gave origin to what is known as the modern *voseo*⁵. In the XV century, *tú* is found as the regular form of address among the characters of theatrical plays, while *vos* was kept for formal addresses only. According to this researcher, from the XVII century on, there is an evolution of the Spanish pronominal system in which the *tú* replaces the *vos* in most of the familiar situations, and the *Usted* appears to be reserved for the formal contexts (Kany, 1945, 58-61).

In particular, regarding the Colombian literary works from mid XX century, Kany notes that the forms *vusté* and *vustedes* are used as formal pronouns of address, while *sus mercedes* is employed among coworkers. The researcher also documents the preference for *Usted* –instead of *tú*– when theatrical characters want to express anger or give commands (Kany, 1945, 93-97).

More recently, Brown and Gilman (1960), offered a sociolinguistic perspective for the analysis of pronominal systems⁶, which can be applied to the Spanish system. According to these authors, speech communities tend to establish and maintain their vertical and horizontal social relationships through the assignment of semantic codes to the pronouns of address. In this way, power and subordination, as well as solidarity, familiarity and intimacy can be determined by the choice of pronouns, given that their tacit semantics are known by all members of the speech community (Brown et Gilman, 1960, 258). The particular application of these principles to the case of the Colombian Spanish will be discussed throughout the article.

In a later publication, Montes Giraldo (1967) produced the first dialectological study on Colombian Spanish. Based on the proposal by Brown

⁵ “The pronoun *vos* is used with the archaic forms of the verbs in second person singular of the plural: *amás* (=amáis), *tenés* (=tenéis), *amastes* (=amasteis), *tuvistes* (=tuvisteis); and in the imperative *amá* (=amad), *tené* (tened), *vení* (=venid).” Kany, 1945,61.

⁶ Their analysis is based on the French pronominal system.

and Gilman (1960), this researcher pointed out that the use of *tú* and *Usted* in Colombia would be determined not only by the degree of familiarity and proximity but also by the place of origin of the speaker. (Montes Giraldo, 1967:43). His study also reports on the use of a third pronoun not mentioned by Brown and Gilman, which is *vos*. Montes Giraldo mapped the use of *voseo*⁷ mainly in the Northern Andean region, while the *tuteo* was seen mainly peripherally to the capital city and the Northern Atlantic coast. In the remaining regions of the Pacific coast, the Andean region and the Eastern plains, an alternation of *tú* and *Usted* was documented. Montes Giraldo based his observations on the information to be included in the first Atlas Lingüístico y Etnográfico de Colombia, which had been developed by Luis Florez in the early 60s, but due to budgetary issues could not be officially published until 1981.

With a subsequent increasing interest for urban dialectology, sociolinguistic studies focused on the use of pronouns of address in Bogotá. Regarding Colombian Spanish spoken by the middle class of the capital city, Uber (1985) informs of a replacement of the older forms *su merced*, *mijo/mija* by a consistent *tú of solidarity*. She interprets the linguistic behavior of the community as one oscillating in a continuum in which the extremes are determined by a *Usted of non-solidarity* and a *Ustedeo de confianza (Usted of trust)*. In the middle of this continuum it lies a *tú* with expanded semantics, which allows users to employ it with a stranger as well as with a well-known acquaintance (Uber 1985:390). (See Figure 1).

⁷ We will use: *voseo* to name the use of the pronoun *vos*; *tuteo* for the use of the pronoun *tú*; and *Ustedeo* for the use of the pronoun *Usted*.

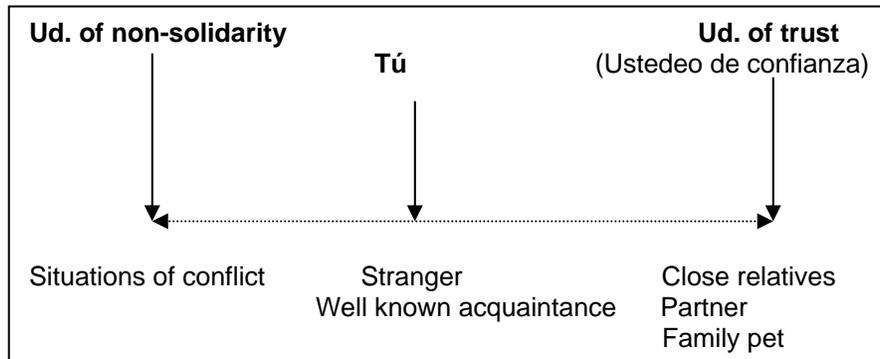


Figure 1: Semantics of pronominal system in Bogotá, based on Uber (1985)

A more recent study re-examined the middle-high class speech community in Bogotá, by looking at the preferences of university students regarding the pronouns of address. Bartens (2002) surveyed 25 business students among which she found non-symmetrical perceptions of the use of the pronouns: in general, men participants preferred the *Ustedeo de confianza* with other men of the same age, while women would opt by the *tuteo* when addressing other women of the same age. In addition, men reported the use of *Usted* in more familiar and affective relations such as with brothers or younger relatives, while for women, the *tuteo* is the preferred form in most social and familiar situations (Bartens, 2002:7). In other words, male and female perceptions of the semantics of *tú* and *Usted* seem not only to be non-reciprocal, but completely opposite. Bartens observations concur with those of Kany (1953) who stated that *Usted* is used as a form of respect and as referent of intimacy, especially with children, where it would replace the *tú*. However, Bartens limits her findings to bare descriptive statistics, which hinders the inferential application of the findings to the general speech community.

In 2004, the PRESEEA-BOGOTÁ group launched a detailed study of the Spanish dialect currently spoken in Bogotá. Based on social stratification⁸, level of instruction, age, and gender of the population, the group is planning on

⁸ Criteria employed by the official Departamento Nacional de Planeación in order to zone out the cost of utilities according to income level of the population.

surveying 108 participants who have lived in the city for at least ten years. This survey will include a complete section dedicated to the use of pronouns of address, based on a questionnaire that incorporates elements from the study made by Carmen Silva-Corvalán and Isabel Molina with the group PRESEEA-ALCALA, and previous research conducted by the Department of Dialectology and the Seminar Andrés Bello of the Instituto Caro y Cuervo. Given that the study is not yet completed, our article won't be able to comment on their findings.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on a street survey administered to 150 pedestrians in Bogotá. A street survey was chosen as the eliciting method in order to provide wider range of participants, both in diversity and in number, than previous studies that were developed in more controlled environments (See Bartens, 2002). The population interviewed consisted of a 47.3% of female participants and 52.7% of male participants (Table 2):

Participants	Total	Percentage
Female	71	47.3
Male	79	52.7

Table 1: Distribution of participants by sex

The subjects were grouped by age, a classification which has consistently been considered throughout the analysis of the data (Table 2).

Participants grouped by age	Total	Percentage
20-25	56	37.3
25-35	28	18.7
35-45	29	19.3
45 and older	37	24.7

Table 2: Distribution of participants by age

In order to collect the data, four different interviewers were trained (Table 3):

Interviewers	Personal characteristics
Interviewer 1	Young female (~25)
Interviewer 2	Young male (~25)
Interviewer 3	Older (45+) female
Interviewer 4	Older (45+) male

Table 3: Personal characteristics of interviewers

This range of interviewers would allow us to establish a number of relevant correlations regarding age and gender of the interviewer with the first spontaneous answer provided by the participants. Therefore, each interviewer would initially aim to survey five subjects from every sociolinguistic variable (age, sex, education level) so that we could obtain enough tokens –in diversity and number- to guarantee a representative sample of the speech behavior of the community.⁹ However, during the actual course of the study, the interviewers developed a series of concerns: On one hand, they did not feel themselves welcomed in low income neighborhoods whose social conventions were unfamiliar to them, factor that induced an apprehensive attitude for their own security. On the other, in some of the chosen interview sites –such as malls or popular corners of the city- the security personnel who worked for the bussiness felt uneasy about their questioning pedestrians, and objected the presence of the interviewers. In addition, many of the pedestrians seemed particularly reticent to answering questions they considered ‘of personal nature’, or avoided the

⁹ The sample we initially expected to collect intended to be composed as follows: five young males, contacted in a low-income neighborhood; five young females, contacted in a low income neighborhood; five older (45+) males, contacted in a low income neighborhood; five older (45+) females, contacted in a low income neighborhood; five young males, contacted in a high income neighborhood; five young females, contacted in a high income neighborhood; five older (45+) males, contacted in a high income neighborhood; five older (45+) females, contacted in a high income neighborhood

interviewers mistaking them for sales people¹⁰. As a consequence, the theoretical distribution of an ideal sociolinguistic study had to adapt to the realities of a society that lives in permanent state of alert, undoubtedly induced by a prolonged civil war that has lasted for decades in Colombia. Thus, this study is based on 150 surveys¹¹, whose participants were randomly chosen by the interviewers at different sites they considered “safe” for all the parties involved¹².

In order to tap into the implicit and explicit sociolinguistic competence of the participants, the actual protocol was divided in two parts. Part I aimed to document the implicit sociolinguistic competence of the participants, and it was inspired in the methodology that Labov (1960) followed to look into the morpho-phonological behavior of the speech community of New York city. Our adaptation consisted of a colloquial question used to approach the participant (1), in which the interviewer avoided priming the individual with any pronoun of address, leaving the choice opened to the subject. This would allow us to record the spontaneous reactions of the participants, when addressing an interviewer with the specific characteristics mentioned above (See Table 3).

1. Perdón, cómo llego a Unicentro?

Excuse me, how do I get to Unicentro?

Once the form of address spontaneously used in the answer had been recorded, the interviewer would obtain informed consent for the study, and then proceed to collect the demographic information of the participant and complete Part II of the questionnaire.

Part II consisted of questioning the participants about which pronoun of address currently they use with their social network. The design of this section of

¹⁰ The official data of unemployment rates in Colombia is of 18%, which has forced a pronounced increase of informal commerce as means of subsistence. (DANE 2005)

¹¹ Number of valid interviews included in the data base

¹² Important to note that the interviewers still attempted to keep a proportional ratio of older and younger population, as well as to include male and female participants.

the protocol was initially based on Bartens (2002), but we included a wider range of categories (Table 4):

Qué pronombre usa al dirigirse a: <i>What pronoun do you use towards:</i>
Sus abuelos; <i>Your grandparents</i>
Sus vecinos; <i>Your neighbors</i>
Cuando echa un piropo; <i>When you complement someone</i>
Su jefe; <i>Your boss</i>
Compañeros de trabajo de su misma edad; <i>Co-workers of your age</i>
Compañeros de trabajo mayores; <i>Older co-workers</i>
Compañeros de trabajo menores; <i>Younger co-workers</i>
Familiares de su misma edad; <i>Relatives of your age</i>
Familiares mayores; <i>Older relatives</i>
Familiares menores; <i>Younger relatives</i>
La empleada del servicio; <i>A maid</i>
Sus padres; <i>Your parents</i>
Hermanos mayores; <i>Older siblings</i>
Hermanos menores; <i>Younger siblings</i>
Sus hijos; <i>Your own children</i>
Otros niños; <i>Any children</i>
El cajero del banco; <i>The bank teller</i>
Un taxista; <i>A taxi driver</i>
Un político; <i>A politician</i>
El portero del banco; <i>The doorman of a bank</i>
Su pareja; <i>Your partner</i>

Table 4: Part II of protocol. Items of social network.

The demographic information, along with the two parts of the study, allowed the collection of more than 3,00 responses. In this way, the study offers a valuable sample of the population in question, provides the opportunity to explore significant correlations among the sociolinguistic variables of sex, age, and origin -among others- and also parallels and amplifies successful methodology employed in previous studies.

3. THE FINDINGS

The collection of spontaneous responses through Part I of the questionnaire allowed us to observe a rather interesting situation. A first look at the data would seem to indicate that the participants have a tendency to address strangers with a formal *Usted*, independently of age and gender of addressee (Table 5).

Interviewer	Tú	Usted	Vos	Other	Total
Female < 25	2	38			40
Male <25	20	22			42
Female > 45	9	16		3	28
Male > 45	1	36	1	2	40

Table 5: Pronoun used by participants in spontaneous answer, according to interviewer

But more in detail, it is important to note that the young male interviewer received the pronouns *tú* and *Ud.* in almost equal proportions (Pearson Chi Square .000; df 9). In addition, we found that there is a perfectly even distribution in the preference of the pronouns and the gender of the participants in this section of the sample. According to the data, both, female and male participants use the pronoun *tú* and the pronoun *Usted* in the same proportion towards the young male interviewer. And even if this group of interviews only accounts for the 28% of the total sample, and the distribution of answers is not statistically significant (Fisher Exact 0.65), it is important to observe that in this case, the speech community seems to have no particular preference for a specific pronoun towards young males.

The second part of the questionnaire shows some consistency with the answers we obtained through the spontaneous answers. When our participants were asked about the choice of pronoun they would use towards their younger

coworkers, we obtained a set of data that seems to be shifting generationally (Table 6).

Age/Pronoun	Tú	Ud.	Vos	Sumercé	Don't know/ Don't have	Total
[20-25]	27	10	1	1	17	56
[25-35]	10	15			3	28
[35-45]	3	13			13	29
45 and older	9	23			5	37
Total	49	61	1	1	38	150

Table 6: Choice of pronoun to address younger coworker

Through this section of the data we can observe how older generations [45 and older] and [35-45] clearly prefer to use *Usted* than *tú* 23/9 and 13/3 respectively, while the youngest generation [20-25] expresses the opposite relation: they prefer *tú* over *Usted* in a ratio 27/10. This can be read as an indication that the different generations of the population are going through a process of change in the criteria regarding the use of pronouns. But even more interesting are the tokens collected from the participants in the [25-35] age group. They reported an almost even number of tokens regarding the preference of the pronouns: *tú* was preferred by 10 participants while *Usted* was preferred by 15 participants. This particular finding is consistent with the one documented through Part I of the study, and confirms that the population interviewed manifests certain ambivalence in the criteria regarding the semantics of the pronominal system.

Among other findings from Part II of the study, the survey registered the use of the pronoun *sumercé* coexisting with the pronouns *tú*, *Ud.* and *vos*. This point in particular would allow us to argue against Uber (1985) who had declared that the pronoun *sumercé* had been replaced by the pronouns *tú* and *Usted*. However, the pronoun seems to be reserved to address older generations given that 3.3% of the population self-reported the use of *sumercé* to address their

parents, and 2% to address their grandparents. This suggests that the pronoun is losing currency among Colombian Spanish speakers, and it may indeed disappear within the near future of the speech community.

This particular finding may be associated to the principle that Brown and Gilman (1960) stated regarding the existence of vertical sociolinguistic parameters that acknowledged power, and horizontal parameters that expressed solidarity through the choice of pronouns. The survival of *sumercé* reveals that certain sectors of the population actively acknowledge a particular status -of respect- to the elderly, by employing a special pronoun when addressing them. In addition, it was seen that the pronoun *Usted* is the preferred choice of the participants when addressing their grandparents (Pearson Chi Square .000; df 15). On the opposite direction, we see that the pronominal system establishes a relationship of power over younger siblings and younger coworkers: In both cases, the data reported favored the use of *tú* over *usted* (Pearson .000, df 12 and Pearson .001, df 12 respectively). This fact can be interpreted as a perception of the semantics of *tú* as a means to exercise power and superiority over younger addressees, and the semantics of *Usted* and *sumercé* as a way to acknowledge power or superiority. This fact agrees with Brown and Gilman's proposal (1960), which expressed that the power of semantics is non-reciprocal, and is reflected in the choice of the pronouns of address. In the same way, horizontal sociolinguistic parameters of solidarity were revealed by the participants, when declaring a preference for *Usted* at the time of addressing their coworkers of the same age and their relatives of the same age (Pearson .037; df 2 and –marginal- Pearson .062 df 20 respectively).

This may lead us to think that the present status of the Colombian speech community actually depicts not only a *tú* with expanded semantics (Uber 1985), but also a *Usted* with an ample range of meanings: *Ustedeo de confianza* (Uber 1985), *usted of respect* –towards parents and grandparents-, and *usted of solidarity* towards same age relatives and coworkers.

4. DISCUSSION

In a pioneering way, the design of our study documents not only implicit sociolinguistic knowledge in an authentic communicative situation but also evidence of explicit sociolinguistic knowledge through the section of self-reports regarding the use of the pronominal system. In particular, this article provides evidence of a process of change in the perception of semantics of the pronouns when addressing certain sectors of the population. The documented almost even numbers of *tuteo* and *Ustedeo* when addressing the young male interviewer as well as when addressing younger coworkers give us ample room to affirm that we have been able to document a precise sociolinguistic moment of ambivalence in the criteria regarding the semantics of the Colombian pronominal system. Equally important, the survey was also successful in registering the survival of the *sumercé* pronominal form, which had not been documented as still active by the latest studies of the speech community. The coexistence of *sumercedeo*, *voseo*, *tuteo*, and *Ustedeo* as effective forms of address offers a clear picture of the linguistic diversity that characterizes Bogotá.

On the other hand, the practicalities of conducting the study implied a range of considerations that reflected social, demographic, and political aspects. The unpredictable fact that collecting the sample would be determined first by safeguarding the safety of the interviewers, turned out to be a circumstance that actually added sociological relevance to the experience. This study not only offers an updated picture of the linguistic status of the speech community in Bogotá, but also a testimony about the coercion that a society that lives amongst violence exercises on academic activity.

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