



## Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

---

Volume 12 | Issue 1

Article 13

---

2-13-1986

### Estáis en Maracaibo: The Form and Function of the Voseo in Venezuela

Glen C. Worthey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls>

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Worthey, Glen C. (1986) "Estáis en Maracaibo: The Form and Function of the Voseo in Venezuela," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol12/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

"Estáis en Maracaibo":  
The Form and Function of the Voseo in Venezuela

Glen C. Worthey  
Brigham Young University

The differentiation between the formal and the informal in European languages is, to some extent, a cultural stumbling block for English speakers, who some time ago abandoned such distinctions. The societal and cultural nuances expressed by the choice of one form or another are often significant in the process of communication; even when this distinction is not of great importance, its very presence is an indication of the richness of these languages.

It seems to be the general tendency of some modern European languages to abandon or lessen the use of the informal forms of the second person, eventually sending them, presumably, to the dark realms of archaism, where "thee" and "thou" are among the principal prisoners. One linguist notes that, "for example, in English you and in French vous do not seem such distancers' because of their having assumed . . . certain shades of the thou (today practically disappeared) and the tu" (del Castillo, 639).

Although this process of simplification and language "leveling" has occurred in Latin American Spanish (note especially the disappearance of the plural vosotros forms), there is nonetheless an interesting counter trend in the use of a "hyper-familiar" form of the second person singular, the voseo, in many parts of Latin America.

Many who have studied the historical aspects of the voseo--its linguistic development, its cultural and social implications, and so forth (see especially the works of del Castillo, Fontanella de Weinberg, and Pierris)--have recognized its "inevitable descent" from a "pronoun of respect" to "the lowest sign of a loss of prestige" (del Castillo, 603-05). Indeed, according to Rona (the author of perhaps the most complete work on the subject), until recently "the voseo was totally exiled from written language. Castillo further calls for the preservation (in terms of "linguistic ecology") of the voseo as a "living fossil" (630).

In the Americas the voseo has assumed different forms and functions. Despite the warnings of Rona to the contrary (76), we are going to call the three basic forms according to the areas of their most frequent usage, that is, Argentine, Chilean, and Venezuelan. These are shown below in table form, along with the "academy" and "archaic" forms of the second person singular for comparison (Rona, 71-72).

Infinitive	sentarse	comer	venir	ser	estar
Academy Spanish (tú)	te sientas séntate	comes come	vienes ven	eres sé	estás está
Archaic form (vos)	os sentáis sentaos	coméis comed	venís venid	sois sed	estáis estad
Argentine voseo	te sentás sentáte	comés comé	venís vení	sos ?	estás ?
Chilean voseo	te sentáis ?	comís ?	venís ?	? ?	? ?
Venezuelan voseo	te sentáis sentáte	coméis comé(d)	venís vení(d)	sois ?	estáis ?

The "archaic" form has verb conjugations and object pronouns identical to those of the modern plural form vosotros. It was this ambiguity, according to Fontanella de Weinberg, which suppressed the development of vos in Spain, and the disappearance of the vosotros in America which allowed that development (233).

«¿Queréisme vos declarar  
Quién sois? – No os ha de importar;  
Una dueña de esta casa.–  
Dueña, porque la señora  
Sois de la casa. – Eso no.»

(Spain, c. 17th century)

The "Argentine", or ás, form is, according to Rona, the dominant form in Latin America (78). As we see in Quino's "Mafalda" comic from Argentina, this type of voseo consists mainly of an accent shift in the regular tú conjugation in both the imperative and the indicative moods, the te object pronouns, and the vos subject pronoun:



The "Chilean" (ís) form (of which I have no example) is identified by Rona as much more widespread in South America than the áis ("Venezuelan") form (82), which we see in this excerpt from a personal letter:

Espero ¡CANALIA! que me mandéis la foto que  
te pedí, porque sino vas a recibir en la pró-  
xima...

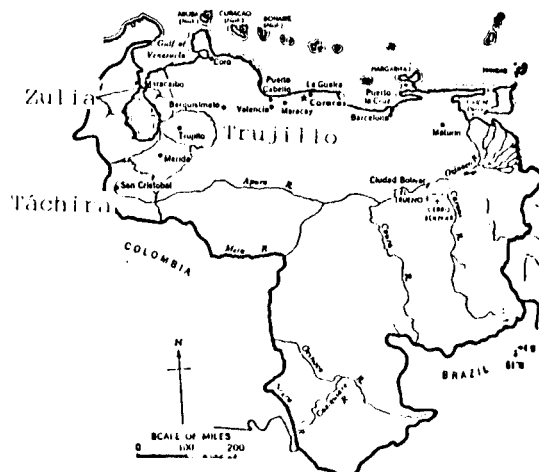
As we can see even from the small number of occurrences, this form is similar to the "archaic" form except in its use of

the te subject pronoun (Fontanella de Weinberg says that this phenomenon occurs with "almost total uniformity in all of the zones where the voseo is used in America" [228]) and the irregular (i.e., unexpected) conjugation of the verb ir (vas instead of vais).

Information and research about the voseo in Venezuela is scanty and contradictory at best (Rona, 45), although I have recently learned of a new study conducted by Joseph Mancini, a graduate student at Brigham Young University. Even in Rona's complete and meticulous study, which he did by means of a massive mailing of questionnaires, there is such a small amount of data that it would seem statistically insignificant: only three of the 98 inquiries sent to Venezuela were returned with information (22). My data is, perhaps, no less scanty and scattered, but it is direct and personal, and, more importantly, does not always coincide with what has been published.

The most notable characteristic of the Venezuelan voseo is its regionality. Rona claims to have abandoned the "ancient custom of considering each country [or region] as a linguistic unit" (78). In this he is, perhaps, justified, for, as he says, "linguistic units . . . [are] determined exclusively by linguistic facts (isoglosses)" (78). Nevertheless, we ought not to ignore the impact of borders and geographic boundaries on culture and, subsequently, language; in many cases, political "facts" become linguistic "facts". This is certainly the case in Venezuela, where the vos form has become strongly identified with a particular state (Zulia), and, even more so, with its principal city, Maracaibo.

We are justified in drawing such a conclusion, contrary to the most respected research, partly because of two observations about the language in Western Venezuela: first,



in spite of the great geographic separation occasioned by the immense Lake Maracaibo and the Gulf of Venezuela, the voseo is common on both sides. This seems strange; the

bridge crossing the outlet of the lake into the gulf is the only physical connection between the two sides (at least in the north), and it is only a recent development. We may account for the linguistic "fact" (the common usage of the voseo on both sides of the lake) most readily by recognizing that the boundary of Zulia encompasses both sides, and extends to the southern tip of the lake. Secondly, in spite of the geographic proximity of Zulia to its nearest neighboring state to the south (Táchira), the linguistic tendencies do not seem to mix: in many areas of Táchira, the formal Usted form is used almost exclusively, the familiar tú is almost universally avoided (even among children and family members), and the voseo is considered crude.

Nor is this "boundary" phenomenon of diversity restricted to language. I have heard many comments (especially from the inhabitants of these two states) about the cultural characteristics of those from another state: those from Táchira (and from many of the other Venezuelan states) identify the "Zulianos" as a loud, festive, even coarse (grosero) people. The Zulianos themselves recognize this difference, though they perhaps see it in a more complimentary light ("Somos gente alegre," they would say). The music by which many people know the city of Maracaibo ("gaita") is happy, busy, and raucous. On the other hand, people from Zulia warn those traveling to Táchira (and the other Andean states) that they will never again hear the familiar tú. From both states there is the recognition that it is more difficult to gain friends among the Andeans, but that loyalty is strong there. This conservatism is even more apparent in the religious tendencies of Táchira and the other Andean states: traditional Catholicism (both individually and collectively) seems more active and strong, and folk religion--the long-held practices of witchcraft, worship of saints, etc.--is much more widely practiced in the southwest than in Zulia to the north.

The voseo seems to be a matter of regional pride and identity for the Zulians. There is a sign along the highway leading from the Maracaibo International Airport into the city which proudly reads, "Estáis en Maracaibo. Bienvenido!" Certainly there is some "interstate" mixing of these linguistic and cultural tendencies (note especially the odd, occasional use in the state of Trujillo of the formal with a voseo-like accent shift in the imperative: "hagáme el favor" or "digáme"). But, contrary to the vast majority of linguistic studies to date, the Venezuelan voseo seems to be strictly confined to the boundaries of Zulia.

These, of course, are merely personal and incomplete and overly generalized observations. Nevertheless, they point to an area that deserves more careful study and attention. The language of Venezuela is truly rich in cultural and historical information; we ought to learn from it.

## WORKS CITED

- del Castillo Mathiew, Nicolas. Testimonios del uso de "vuestra merced," "vos," y "tu" en America (1500-1650). Thesaurus 37 (1982) 3:602-44.
- Fontanella de Weinberg, Maria Beatriz. La constitucion del paradigma pronominal de voseo. Thesaurus 32 (1977) 2:227-41.
- Pierris, Marta de. El prelude del voseo en el espanol medieval. Romance Philology 31 (1977) 2:235-43.
- Rona, Jose Pedro. Geografia y morfologia del <voseo>. Porto Alegre, Brasil (Pontificia Universidade Catolica do Rio Grande do Sul):1967.