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A Diachronic History of
Spanish Second Person Pronoun Vos

George Myers
Brigham Young University

During my second semester midterms at Brigham Young University I sat nervously in a small cubical waiting for my Spanish conversation instructor to arrive. I hoped to survive my first oral examination. Even though I had studied Spanish for nearly seven years, this interview seemed like an overwhelming situation. The instructor arrived, and before I knew it the exam was over. I had not only passed the examination, but something happened that changed my life.

My instructor’s parting question has remained with me for many years. He asked me where I had learned to speak in vos. I didn’t know. I didn’t even know that I had spoken in vos, and I hardly knew how vosco forms differed from the “standard.” Ever since that day, I have paid closer attention to the languages and dialects I have encountered.

I do not want to bore you with my personal interactions with vos; however, I do feel that vos merits our linguistic consideration. Unfortunately, “the vosco phenomenon, the use of vos as the second person singular familiar address,” according to Anne Pinkerton of Cornell College, “has received only the most cursory treatment by many grammarians” (690). Stanley Whitley, among others, states that many grammarians and linguists have followed Andres Bello’s example in condemning vos as a corruption and in teaching the “standard” tú (172).

In contrast to Bello, I do not see vos as a corruption of the standard, but as a grammatical form that has persisted in certain areas despite suppressive pressures of a narrow-minded few. I also feel vos can play a significant role in understanding how paradigmatic relations relate to semantic change. In this essay, I will provide vos’s diachronic history from Latin to modern-day usages. Along the way I will point out how unclear distinctions within a paradigm permit semantic shift, which in turn allows for the introduction of new elements into the paradigm.

200 B.C.

Resulting from a dispute over the control of Sicily in 264 B.C., the Carthaginians and Romans fought a series of wars, known as the Punic Wars. Although the Carthaginian army under Hannibal’s command nearly defeated Rome, by 202 B.C. the Romans had forced the Carthaginians to surrender, enabling the Roman Empire to firmly entrench in the Iberian peninsula. Despite a few subsequent rebellions, Rome dominated the peninsula for nearly six hundred years, profoundly influencing the small developing country of Spain (Poulter 16).

With Roman soldiers and administrators settling in and controlling the region, Spain’s people quickly adapted to the expanding Roman civilization. One of the most significant marks the Romans left on Spain remains today in the form of language. Absorbing a few minor influences from indigenous tongues, Latin took root in Castile and flourished into modern Spanish (Poulter 17). Among the borrowed Latin words, we
find the personal pronouns. In *A History of the Spanish Language*, Ralph Penny indicates that "Latin had specific person pronouns only for the first and second grammatical persons; for the third person, Latin used any of the demonstratives (IS. HIC, ISTLE, ILE), although ILE came to be preferred in this new role . . . of third person" (119). I have included a chart with Latin first and second person pronouns in a paradigm (see Figure 1). Each element in the paradigm possesses two aspects/contrasts. For example, *ego* signifies both first person and singular, while *vos* indicates second person and plural.

**Figure 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>singular</th>
<th>plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st per.</td>
<td><em>ego</em></td>
<td><em>nos</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd per.</td>
<td><em>tú</em></td>
<td><em>vos</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

300 B.C.

With only two contrasts (singular vs. plural, first person vs. second person) the paradigm remained stable with only four elements; however, in A.D. 300 the paradigm acquired a new contrast that caused the distinctions to blur. This new contrast appeared when Roman royalty began using the second person plural form, *vos*, when referring to the emperor, a single individual (see Figure 2). Yolanda Solé presents two possible reasons for this use of *vos*. First the emperor represents a political plurality or, in other words, an entire nation, therefore meriting the use of a plural form. Solé’s second explanation proposes that the majestic *vos* indicated a division of authority that deserved respect (168–69).

As more royalty used *vos* when referring to a single person, *vos* began to lose its central meaning of "plural" and to gain a marginal meaning of "respect." Bloomfield defines such a shift from a central to a marginal meaning by a particular group as his first condition preparatory to semantic change. His second condition for semantic change states that language (including pronouns) transmits discontinuously, suggesting that subsequent generations will learn an imperfect form of their parents’ language (qtd. in McMahon 176). With the plural and singular uses of *vos* beginning to overlap, the chances of a child learning an imperfect form of their parents’ language increase dramatically. According to Bloomfield’s conditions, *vos* appeared ready for semantic change.

With perfect hindsight, we have predicted correctly. Originally only royalty used *vos*, but by process of identification, *vos* extended to include nobility and others of high status. These speakers delegated the use of *tú* to lower social classes. Below in Figure 2, a dashed line between the second person singular and plural pronouns indicates that this distinction had become increasingly blurred as the group using the singular *vos* increased in size.

**Figure 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>singular</th>
<th>plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st per.</td>
<td><em>yo</em></td>
<td><em>nos</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd per.</td>
<td><em>tú</em></td>
<td><em>vos</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A.D. 900–1400

As generations passed, more and more speakers, including the general public, begin to use *vos* to refer to other individuals of their same social class and to use *tú* when speaking to someone of inferior rank. Solé points out that in the famous novel *Cantar de Mio Cid*, the Cid always uses *vos* when speaking to nobility as well as to most of his relatives. On the other hand, he uses *tú* to refer to all of his younger kinsman and to anyone of a lower social class (169). Appearance in such a popular novel of the time indicates *vos* had completely shifted semantically from plural to singular, even among the common classes (see Figure 3).

This shift left a gap in the paradigm’s plural section. To compensate for the gap, speakers tended to add the word *otros*, which means "others" or "all," to *vos* (*vos + otros*) when communicating with a group. This tendency compares to the modern English plural variations of *y’all* (you-all), *you-guys*, and *youse* (Whitley 171–72). As *vos + otros* appeared more often, the two separate words reduced to a single word, *vosotros*, which remains as the present-day form of "standard" Spanish. Speakers no longer used *vos* alone in a plural sense. *Nos* also changed to *nosotros* by analogy (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>singular</th>
<th>plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st per.</td>
<td><em>yo</em></td>
<td><em>nosotros</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd per.</td>
<td><em>vos</em></td>
<td><em>vosotros</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A.D. 900–1400
However, before vosotros could reduce and settle in the paradigm for all of Spain, the Spaniards began their conquest of the New World. Because as many as 60 percent of the conquistadores came from Spain's southern regions, we know that these men alternated vos and tú in their daily speech as their second person singular pronoun. In addition, the adventurers still identified vos + otros as two separate words; hence vosotros did not travel to the Americas with the first Spaniards. For the first time in history, two geographically separate groups of Spanish speakers existed, one in Spain and the other spreading out over the Americas. Geographic separation played a significant role in explaining the second person pronoun's modern usage.

A.D. 1400–1600

Not only has vos shifted semantically away from the plural side of the paradigm, but it also has widened its reference range to include many common social relationships. This widening caused another semantic shift in the paradigm. Meillet proposes that one of the main causes of semantic change involves a social factor, stating that "a word tends to acquire new meaning due to its use by a particular social group, or a word used in a specific sense comes into common currency with an extended meaning” (qtd. in McMahon 180). For example, in the preceding pages we noted that because at first only Roman royalty and then nobility used vos in a singular sense, the public assigned vos an improved value of respect, which exemplifies the semantic change of amelioration.

Using Meillet's social cause of semantic change, we can explain another semantic shift. Because vos became common usage by less than "noble” people and was no longer reserved for the upper class, it lost its aspect of respect through pejoration due to social prejudice from above (179). By the end of the seventeenth century, to address someone in vos was considered an insult, especially in the noble circles. Vos virtually dropped from speech throughout the peninsula and in those parts of America (Peru and Mexico) that maintained closest cultural contact with Spain. Without vos to compete within those areas, tú gained jurisdiction of the second person singular.

Although tú won the second person singular position in the paradigm, it cannot indicate when the speaker intends to show respect or not. The paradigm needed another form to show respect. From among the several new forms that arose to fill the gap in the paradigm, vuestra merced ("Your Grace” or “Your Honor”) was chosen to indicate “respect” or “formality.” Shortly after appearing, vuestra merced reduced to usted, which then contracted to Vd. or Ud.; the plural, vuestras mercedes, also reduced in similar manner to the contracted form, uds. (The written words usted or ustedes rarely appear today in their noncontracted form.)

Now contrasting with the new formal Ud., tú appears only in familiar company (see Figure 4). In modern Spanish, Spain, Mexico, and Peru still have essentially the same pronoun paradigm and the paradigm probably will not change because it has reached a state of homeostasis, where each contrast has exactly two forms. (Remember that vosotros did not arrive in the Americas with the conquistadores; therefore speakers in Mexico and Peru use Uds. instead.)

**Figure 4 Spain/(Mexico/Peru)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1st per.</th>
<th>2nd fam.</th>
<th>2nd formal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>yo</td>
<td>tú</td>
<td>Uds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>nosotros</td>
<td>vosotros</td>
<td>Uds.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A.D. 1600–Present

As previously stated, Spanish colonies (i.e., Mexico and Peru) that had frequent cultural contact with Spain experienced similar changes as did Spain, but other more distant colonies did not (e.g., Argentina and Guatemala). Unfortunately, few in-depth studies evaluate the personal pronoun usage of these “nonstandard pronoun” countries. In this section, I will share what I have learned about Argentina’s vos after living there for two years and while speaking with natives of Argentina. In addition, I will include some of Pinkerton’s observations she made while living in Guatemala. Due to the “nonstandardness” of these countries’ pronouns, a proper evaluation of their dialects requires personal experience within the region.

During the colonial period, Argentina was one of the most geographically distant Spanish-speaking countries from Spain. As a consequence it also differed greatly in culture and other aspects of life, as seen by its pronoun system. For example, the vosotros form never arrived in Argentina from Spain in any form other than the Bible; hence in
Argentina, Uds. rather than vosotros occupies second person plural place in the paradigm.

Some grammarians feel that tú has completely dropped from usage in Argentina, being replaced by vos. This is not true. The tú form appears in religious contexts, for example, when speaking directly with God. Also, when foreigners are involved in a formal conservation, most Argentines will speak in tú, adjusting to the "standardized" form. Nonetheless, everyone in the Spanish speech community knows that Argentina favors the use of vos.

Because of its preferred status, vos has taken on a traditional sense, a sense of belonging to Argentina. Even though teachers do not teach vos in school, most do not discourage it and may even refer to students in vos. Rather than the Argentine vos being a deviation from today's norm, it seems to me that the last time the "standard" form shifted in Spain, Argentines simply remained on course where references for tú were diminishing and vos increasing. I have represented the resulting paradigm of the Argentine pronouns in Figure 5.

Figure 5
Argentina

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st per.</td>
<td>yo</td>
<td>nosotros</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd fam. (God)</td>
<td>vos</td>
<td>Uds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd formal</td>
<td>Ud.</td>
<td>Uds.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now let's shift to Pinkerton's observations in the use of tú, vos, and usted in Guatemala. Pinkerton notes that the choice of pronouns in Guatemala seems to depend on two factors: race and gender. She states the use of vos and the absence of tú and often usted in the Spanish of the Indian population does not surprise her due to the fact that the Indians' native tongues would cause negative transfer or interference. Another factor that might account for this selection of pronouns is that the Indians rarely receive formal schooling; hence they most often learn Spanish through the oral speech of the community they live in (691).

Later in her essay, Pinkerton says that the use of the second person pronouns among Guatemalan Ladinos intrigued and perplexed her but nevertheless she quickly learned that the use of voseo was predominately reserved for the show of solidarity among males (691) (see Figure 6). "Real" men use vos among their friends.

On the other hand, Pinkerton's report states that females rarely used voseo because of its vulgar connotations. The few women who did use vos were viewed as less feminine by both genders, especially when those women used vos in public (695). Very few women openly admitted to using vos; the few women who admitted to occasionally using vos were usually college age. It would be interesting to see if these women will continue to use vos as they grow older or if they will submit to the public view of vos.

Figure 6
Guatemala

1st per. | Singular | Plural |
---------|----------|--------|
2nd fam. (males) | vos       | Uds. |
2nd formal | Ud.      | Uds. |

Conclusion

I feel that the preceding diachronic history demonstrates the linguistic value and beauty of the Spanish second person pronoun vos. This essay has also demonstrated that the voseo is not a deviation or corruption that should be thrown out as Bello and others of the "standard" forms might prefer. In fact, without vos Spanish as a language would lose some of its identity and beauty.

Works Cited


