



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 23 | Issue 1

Article 14

4-1-1997

A Diachronic History of Spanish Second Person Pronoun *Vos*

George Myers

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

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Myers, George (1997) "A Diachronic History of Spanish Second Person Pronoun *Vos*," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol23/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All 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.

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 *voseo* 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 *voseo* 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, ILLE), although ILLE 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

	singular	plural
1st per.	<i>ego</i>	<i>nos</i>
2nd per.	<i>tú</i>	<i>vos</i>

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

	singular	plural
1st per.	<i>yo</i>	<i>nos</i>
2nd per. (respect)	<i>tú</i>	<i>vos</i>

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

	singular	plural
1st per.	<i>yo</i>	<i>nosotros</i>
2nd per.	<i>vos</i> <i>tú</i>	<i>vosotros</i>

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 this 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)

	Singular plural	
1st per.	<i>yo</i>	<i>nosotros</i>
2nd fam.	<i>tú</i>	<i>vosotros</i> (<i>Uds.</i>)
2nd formal	<i>Uds.</i>	<i>Uds.</i>

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 conversation, 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

	Singular	Plural
1st per.	<i>yo</i>	<i>nosotros</i>
2nd fam. (God)	<i>vos</i> (<i>tú</i>)	<i>Uds.</i>
2nd formal	<i>Ud.</i>	<i>Uds.</i>

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

	Singular	Plural
1st per.	<i>yo</i>	<i>nosotros</i>
2nd fam. (males)	<i>tú</i>	<i>Uds.</i>
2nd formal	<i>Ud.</i>	<i>Uds.</i>

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

- McMahon, April M. S. *Understanding Language Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Penny, Ralph. *A History of the Spanish Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Pinkerton, Anne. "Observations on the Tú/Vos Option in Guatemalan Ladino Spanish." *Hispania* 69 (1986): 690-98.
- Poulter, Virgil L. *An Introduction to Old Spanish*. New York: Peter Lang, 1990.
- Solé, Yolanda R. "Correlaciones Socio-Culturales del Uso de Tú/Vos y Usted in La Argentina, Perú y Puerto Rico." *Thesaurus: Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo* 25 (1970): 161-95.
- Whitley, Stanley M. *Spanish/English Contrasts*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1986.