

The Use of *Tú* and *Usted* in Mexican *Compadrazgo* Relationships: A case study

Ariel Vazquez

University of Essex

Abstract

This paper examines the use of second person singular address forms, *tú* (T) and *usted* (V) in Mexican Spanish, in the *compadrazgo* relationships of an elderly married couple. We report their usage of these forms of address in the *compadrazgo* relationships they hold with friends and relatives. In general, it is confirmed that variation in the use of T and V depends on the age of the speakers and their kinships. In particular, this study, based on observations, demonstrates that the pronominal address forms used among *compadres* are highly determined by the relationship that the addressee and the addresser had before they established the *compadrazgo* ties. It is suggested that symmetrical V-V could represent solidarity and closeness between speakers when this symmetry is used in a *compadrazgo* relationship; furthermore we provide evidence to support the hypothesis that exists in the literature, which predicts the shift to symmetrical T-T.

Keywords: T-V distinction, Mexican Spanish, *compadrazgo* relationship, Social Deixis, Speech Styles.

Speech styles, Social Deixis and T/V distinction

In his article *Models of Interaction of Language and Social Life*, Hymes (1972: 52) suggests that in order to “guarantee the maintenance and success of the current interest in sociolinguistics” there is the need for a theory of language use. He claims that this theory should provide specific technical

concepts for the adequate analysis of individual communities; and he proposes some of the notions that such a descriptive theory may involve. He regards speech community as the principal social unit; he affirms that speech community is a local unit whose characteristics may be reflected in a person's primary interaction in a common locality. The other social units that he suggests depart from that principle. These units are speech situation, speech event and speech act. He points out the difference between them using the following example: 'a party (speech situation), a conversation during the party (speech event), a joke within the conversation (speech act)' (56). Having described these units he moves to explain speech styles, which is the social unit of his model with which this paper will deal. He argues that speech styles are selections that people make in their discourse according to their judgment and appropriateness. In regard to the sociolinguistic description, he states that, on the one hand, speech styles have elements of stylistic and referential function; and on the other, they have a syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimension, which means that there is variety of speech styles in the talk of people, and what people do is to choose among these options the adequate one to use in a given context or situation. We could claim then, that the referential function of speech styles and the accommodation of people's choices may constitute what is known as social deixis.

Social deixis is the term used to refer to the way in which, during an interaction, the participants make explicit the social relationship that exists between one another by using certain words, expressions, gestures, etc. In other words, when two people address or refer to each other, they select from the repertoire offered by their language, the appropriate word, expression, gesture, etc. to make explicit their relationship; this means, they reveal their relationship with their choice. Some languages like Spanish, Italian, French and German among others have in their grammar specific pronouns which the speakers can chose in order to manifest certain relationships; according to Fernandez (2003: 3) this happens because pronouns work as *puntos de anclaje*¹ within a conversation; that is, during a conversation or another linguistic interaction, people resort to pronouns when referring or addressing others to distinguish and make explicit their social relationships (e.g. the Spanish pronouns, *tú*, *usted* or the German ones *Sie*, and *du*).² These

¹ Anchor points.

² In English these pronouns are translated as "you".

distinctions that people exhibit are called pronominal. In languages like English³, one does not have such pronominal distinction. Instead what one uses are certain nouns that help us reveal the identity of the people being referred to or addressed (e.g. Mr. or Mrs.); this distinction is described as nominal. We are not trying to imply that if one language has pronominal distinction it would then not have nominal; on the contrary, languages may have one or both and, as said before, other words, expressions, gestures, etc. may be used to reveal the social distinction in a relationship. For example, at work, one chooses to use expressions like 'Good morning' or 'Hi' depending on whom one is greeting, a colleague or one's boss (Brown and Ford, 1961: 38-9). In this paper we focus our analysis on the pronominal distinction.

Mühlhäusler and Herré (1990: 131-2) claim that there are two types of relationships which can be expressed with the pronominal distinction. They call them asymmetrical and symmetrical relationships, the former are 'compounded of respect and condescension, of contempt adulation and patronage', and the latter occur when 'the parties to an interaction agree on the formality, level of politeness or degree of intimacy that is proper'. Sociolinguistic research with respect to this matter focuses its attention on the variation of the pronominal distinction present in the linguistic interaction where the social relationships are displayed by the usage of particular pronouns. In other words, sociolinguistics investigates the social factors that enable the speakers to establish an asymmetric or symmetric relationship with one another.

With respect to the Indo-European languages, the study that is deemed to be the most classic research on this matter is the one carried out, almost fifty years ago, by Roger Brown and Albert Gilman (1960). Their work is based on two semantic dimensions, 'power' and 'solidarity'. They explain that in French, German and Italian the speakers may use two forms of address; on the one hand, speakers could use the asymmetric form T-V⁴ to show a relationship of power; on the other, they may use the symmetrical T-T or V-V, the former used to distinguish a relationship of solidarity and the latter used by speakers belonging to the upper class. They propose that throughout the years

³ In the past English used to have pronominal distinction.

⁴ The Latin pronouns *vos* and *tú*. According to Brown and Gilman (1960: 104-5) the T-V distinction started in the Roman Empire when there were two emperors, one in the eastern and the other in the west. Despite the fact that the empire was ruled by two persons it was unified. Therefore, people used to address the emperors with the plural *vos*. Also the authors argue that the "emperor is also plural in another sense; he is the summation of his people and can speak as their representative (p. 105).

people started to use symmetrical T-T in friendly and close relationships, whereas symmetrical V-V was used to denote formality and politeness. The phenomenon they describe is an overlapping in the semantics dimensions, that is, symmetrical T-T has extended towards relationships where there is no equality in terms of power, but rather in terms of solidarity; correspondingly, symmetrical V-V is used in relationships where the interlocutors do not have the same power or the same closeness with one another. They predicted that solidarity would overcome power; they assert that ‘the change is increase in the number of relations define as solidarity enough to merit a mutual T [, principally in relationships of] camaraderie resulting from a common task or common fate ...’ (Brown and Gilman, 1960: 111). Their paper was the pioneer in the matter; however, their semantic framework cannot be thought to be universal since there are other languages that do not adhere to the pronominal distinction they propose; for example, as Martin (1964: 408-9; Wardhaugh, 2006: 280) shows, when Japanese speakers address someone, they have to take into account the axis of reference (out-groupness and social position) and the axis of address (age and gender) so as to choose the proper address form. Similarly, Mashiry (1999) illustrates how in Shona, an African language, there are different forms of address such as nicknames or prefixes; furthermore this author states that Brown and Gilman’s study should be considered ‘as a local theory of markedness for a narrow range of European languages’ (109).

In this paper we see that also in languages which may fit in the category of ‘Indo-European languages’, in this case Mexican Spanish, a variety of Spanish, there are relationships that do not stick completely to Brown and Gilman’s claims. We specifically focus our attention on the relationship of *compadrazgo* in Mexico, where we may find symmetrical V-V used to reflect a relationship of solidarity and closeness. The aim of this paper is twofold: (a) we intend to show that the pronominal T/V distinction in *compadrazgo* relationships may partially follow Brown and Gilman’s hypothesis and (b) we analyze and illustrate the variation that exists in the forms of address in the Mexican relationship of *compadrazgo*. The data used in this paper was taken from the observation of the usage of the pronominal address forms in the *compadrazgo* relationships of Antelmo and Carmelita, a Mexican couple.

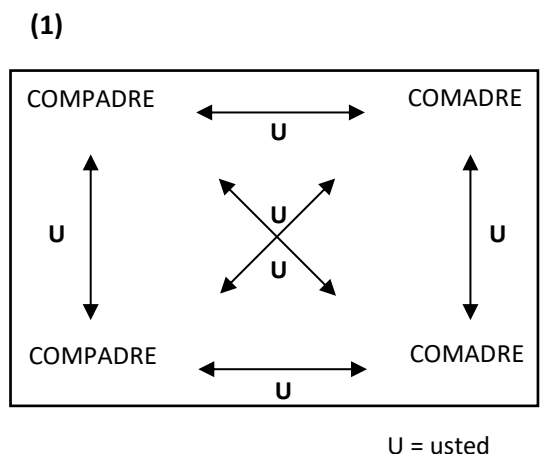
The *Compadrazgo* T-V distinction

First of all, let us define this relationship: *compadrazgo* is believed to be one of the strongest and closest links that may exist among Latin Americans. It can be defined as a 'system of ritualized personal relations established between two sets of individuals: [on the one hand] the child (*ahijado*) and his godparents (*padrinos*) and [on the other] the parents and the godparents (*compadres*), with the latter ties taking precedence over those between child and godparents' (Kemper, 1982: 28). The origin of this connection is found in the various rites within the Catholic Church such as baptism, confirmation, first communion and marriage; however, more recently has also manifested in other non-religious settings like school graduations, civil marriages, fifteenth birthday celebrations⁵, etc. Through *compadrazgo* the parents and the godparents strengthen ties of friendship and/or kinship; these ties may already exist or it may be the first step towards its creation. To become someone's *padrinos* entails a great responsibility⁶ because they are actually meant to become mentors or substitute parents for the *ahijado*; they should accompany him/her at the ceremony and provide them with the items needed to accomplish that particular ritual.

In regard to the forms of address, the *padrino* and the *ahijado* address each other respectively with those words; and since it is an asymmetrical relationship, it requires the *padrino* to give T (*tú*) and the *ahijado* to give V (*usted*). We may describe this relationship as a power relationship where the subordinate, in this case the *ahijado*, is addressed with T but s/he addresses his/her superior with V. The parents and the godparents call each other *compadre* or *comadre*, depending on the gender. Although we said before that this relationship is meant to strengthen ties of friendship and closeness, which would normally require mutual T-T, in the 'ideal' *compadrazgo* relationship presented by Torrejón (1991: 1074), chart (1), all the dyads shown there use reciprocal V-V. It is worth mentioning that the *compadrazgo* relationship that he describes takes place in Chile

⁵ It is a popular tradition that, on their fifteenth birthday girls have a big party to celebrate their transition from childhood to youth.

⁶ This responsibility is only granted to those who become *padrinos* because of a religious rite.



The chart presents the *compadrazgo* relationship that would exist between two married couples; as we mentioned above all the address forms used in all the possible dyads, even in husband-wife relationship, were V-V (*usted*), which in terms of Brown and Gilman would require symmetrical T-T (*tú*). Torrejón not only claims that the husband-wife dyads in a *compadrazgo* relationship may use symmetrical V-V, but also suggests that in this relationship ‘en el uso pronominal no se observan discrepancias que puedan correlacionarse con el estrato social, sexo o edad...’⁷; however, in the Mexican context of *compadrazgo* that we observed, we found variation depending on the age of the members of the relationship, and on the type of connections that exists between both couples. In general, young couples tend to use symmetrical T-T in all the dyads of chart (1) and they would only use symmetrical V-V within a joke or sarcastic context; in contrast, dyads composed by older people present symmetrical V-V in all the dyads of chart (1). In terms of Brown and Gilman this supports the overlapping of symmetrical T-T with V-V in younger generations. However, we also found variation in dyads of older people depending not only on the age of the dyads members but also on previous relationships they may have had. The couple we describe and analyze here are Antelmo and Carmelita, both in their early sixties; we focus on the *compadrazgo* relationships they hold with relatives and friends; and we consider as variables that may influence the pronominal distinction the age of the dyads’ members and the previous relationships amongst them.

⁷ ‘There is no variation with regard to social class, sex or age in the pronominal usage’.

Compadrazgo among relatives

We have stated that, even though the *compadrazgo* is a relationship of friendship and closeness, people use symmetrical V-V to address each other; our data provides us with evidence to suggest that the pronominal address form that is used among *compadres* is highly determined by the relationship that existed between the addressee and addresser before they established the *compadrazgo* ties. Let us regard the following three examples.

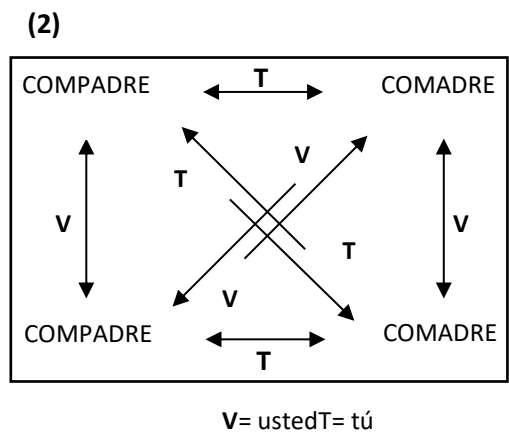


Chart (2), which is rather similar to chart (1), shows the *compadrazgo* relationship between the dyads formed by Antelmo and Carmelita and by Juan and Anita who are in their early seventies; Anita and Antelmo are siblings. As we notice symmetrical V-V is present in almost all the dyads except for the one formed by Antelmo and Anita. Therefore, we infer that they address each other with symmetrical T-T because their kinship clearly precedes the *compadrazgo* relationship. Another dissimilarity with chart (1) is the fact that husband-wife dyads use mutual T-T; this is explained knowing that in Mexico one may never find spouses who address each other neither with symmetrical V-V nor with asymmetrical T-V; none of the couples observed for this paper use this asymmetrical form. Finally, we may say that the remaining dyads in chart (2) all follow the ‘ideal’ pattern of address between *compadres*.

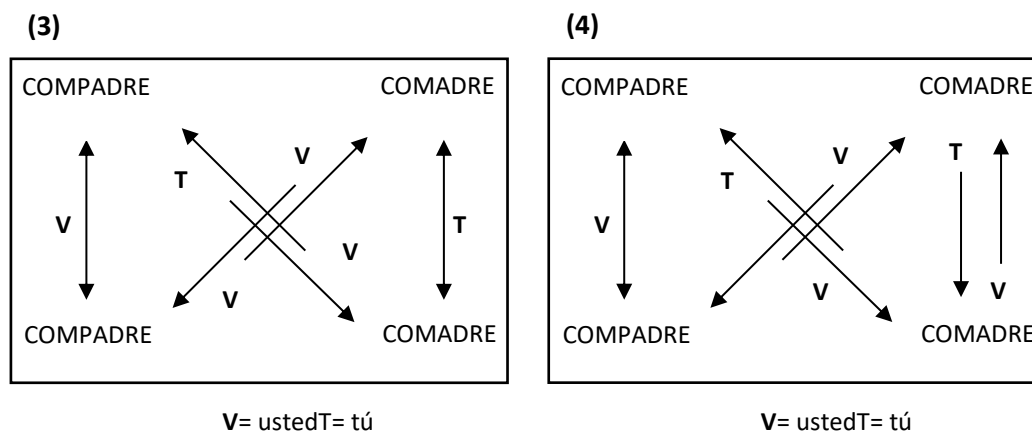


Chart (3) and (4) are other examples. In both of them we have Antelmo and Carmelita accompanied in chart (3) by Alberto and Ana, who are in their mid-fifties; and by Juanito and Martita, who are in their late-forties, in chart (4). Antelmo and Carmelita are Ana and Martita's uncle and aunt-in-law respectively; both women have a very good relationship with Carmelita, but the fact that Ana moved to live with them for five years soon after they got their first child, enabled her to become closer friends with Carmelita than Martita. This explains why Ana and Carmelita use symmetrical T-T whilst Carmelita and Martita use asymmetrical T-V. In other words, the latter dyad remains similar to the dyads formed by Antelmo and his nieces, in that it follows the asymmetrical T-V address form that an uncle-niece relationship requires, despite the friendship between Carmelita and Martita. Carmelita and Ana's dyad resembles the one formed by Antelmo and Anita in chart (2), in the sense that their solidarity symmetry T-T precedes their *compadrazgo* relationship. Furthermore, this dyad can be explained using Gilman and Ford's (1961: 145) paper which describes the 'temporal progression of address form' towards friendship in American English; in this case we could propose that since Carmelita is Ana's aunt, Carmelita and Ana's dyad started with them using asymmetrical address V-T, but as time passed, they became friends and they eventually switched to mutual T-T. Later on, when the *compadrazgo* relationship was established between them they chose not to shift to V-V or to V-T because it would have meant going backwards in the progression towards friendship or solidarity.

Compadrazgo among friends

The *compadrazgo* relationships in the previous charts have been mainly influenced by the kinship and friendship ties held before the *compadrazgo* started; therefore, we may expect symmetrical T-T to be used in *compadrazgo* among friends; however, in the charts below we see that *compadrazgo* among friends may in some cases present symmetrical V-V.

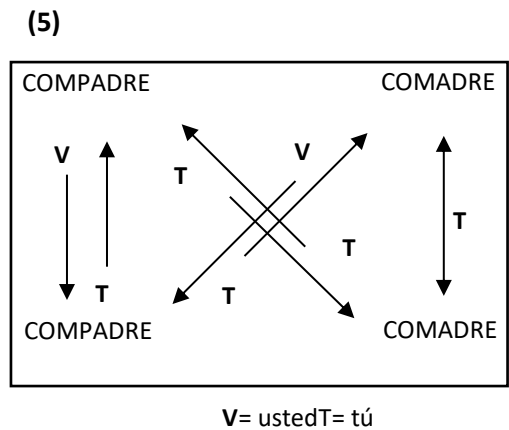
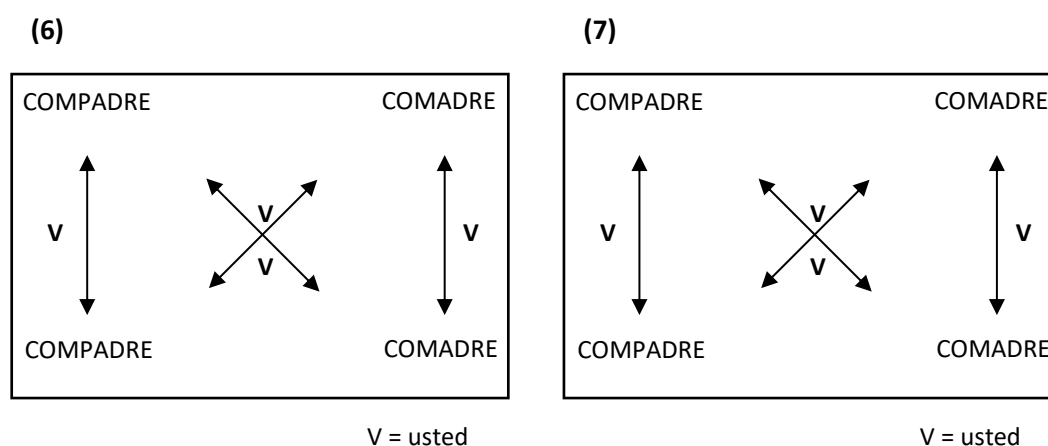


Chart (5) shows a very different usage of address forms. We notice that almost all the dyads are symmetrical T-T, except for those including Emilio. We can explain this by mentioning that Chelita, Antelmo and Carmelita worked for the same bank for around 35 years; they met when they were in their early twenties and now one could even consider their friendship as a ‘best-friend relationship’. That is why they address each other with symmetrical T-T of solidarity and closeness, resembling the dyads Carmelita and Ana (chart 3). The situation with Emilio is different. He is 20 years older than them all and he has never become close friends with Antelmo and Carmelita even after the *compadrazgo* tie. So that is the reason why they keep the asymmetrical T-V of respect with Emilio.



Finally in chart (6) and (7) we have all the dyads as symmetrical V-V illustrating the ‘ideal’ address forms used in a *compadrazgo* relationship proposed by Torrejón (1991). Let us explain why this happens. First in chart (6) we have Fernando and Elena, who are as old as Antelmo and Carmelita. They met when they became neighbours and they started addressing one another using symmetrical V-V which, as suggested by Brown and Gilman, represents a relationship of formality and politeness. Through the years they established a cordial relationship, and then became *compadres*; however, we notice that although they established a relationship of solidarity, such as *compadrazgo*, they do not use symmetrical T-T. We can explain this by suggesting that for them the ‘ideal’ symmetrical V-V form of *compadrazgo* is the one that best reflects their relationship, because they never established a closer friendship before. Chart (6) presents quite similar characteristics. In this case although Carmelita and Margarita are very close friends (they go out to have breakfast every week) they do not use symmetrical T-T. This is because when they first met, they used symmetrical V-V, just like with Fernando and Elena. However, they did not frequent each other for many years, and only re-established their relationship when they became *comadres*, so they chose to keep using symmetrical V-V which for them does not represent asymmetry of formality and politeness, but rather a relationship of closeness and solidarity.

Conclusions

Having described and analyzed the charts above, we may come to the following conclusions:

1. We have found evidence in Antelmo and Carmelita’s *compadrazgo* relationships among relatives and friends to propose that symmetrical V-V represents a relationship of solidarity and closeness

when this symmetry is used in a *compadrazgo* relationship. Furthermore, the symmetrical V-V of *compadrazgo* may vary depending on the age of the members of the dyad and the previous relationships (e.g. kinship, friendship) they may have been involved in after establishing the *compadrazgo* tie.

2. Symmetrical V-V seems to be present in all of Antelmo and Carmelita's *compadrazgo* relationship charts; and although not exemplified here, we have observed that *compadrazgo* relationships between young Mexican couples do not present this form of address; we then may suggest that symmetrical V-V can be considered as a characteristic of Mexican *compadrazgo* relationships used by the elderly.

3. Brown and Gilman's hypothesis was confirmed with regard to the fact that new generations have shifted to symmetrical T-T in a relationship that requires symmetrical V-V; however, we have shown that symmetrical V-V is used in relationships of solidarity and closeness.

Final remarks

In terms of Hymes, we have shown examples where the 'syntagmatic' and 'paradigmatic' dimensions of speech styles are present; in other words we have seen how people choose from the pronominal form of address the option that is thought to be the most appropriate to use; we have seen as well how the choices that people make of the T/V pronouns reflect the relationship they have with others as well as which are the social relationships that may determine a symmetrical or asymmetrical address form; or as Gilman and Ford explain 'the selection of certain linguistic forms is governed by the relation between the speaker and his addressee' (1961: 128).

Finally, we want to mention that in the research consulted, all with regard to the forms of address, we noticed that all of this research gives a description and interpretation of social deixis. However the authors differ in their instruments used to collect data, which are mainly of three kinds: questionnaires (e.g. Brown and Gilman 1960; Orozco, 2006); analysis of plays (e.g. Gilman and Ford, 1961; Jaramillo, 1996); and observations (Solé, 1978; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1980; Ringer, 1985; Ardila, 2003). All of them have proved to be adequate to achieve the aims of each study and to be sufficient to analyze variation in the forms of address. However, we believe that further research should consider ethnographic data as it could provide other elements that people in interaction use to show

the relationship that exists between the participants; for example, the different actions in which the pronominal or nominal forms of address are involved within interaction and the different context they might create. These would enrich the analysis

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