'Tú is what the other person does': The pragmatic divide between intention and interpretation in personal address.

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Comments
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The pragmatic divide between intention and interpretation in personal address

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Abstract

Personal address is a pervasive index of identities, relationships and culture that is of enduring interest to pragmatics research and theory (see Clyne, Norrby & Warren, 2009; Hughson, 2009, for recent work). Sociolinguistic models of personal address proceed from a correlational perspective, in which choices among alternative address terms are centered on variation between the formal (V) and informal (T) second person pronouns. Research in this tradition presumes relatively direct connections between specifiable situational variables, such as relative age, familiarity, and sex, and address term choices. By contrast, the cultural perspective proceeds from the assumption that personal address reveals a unique system of norms and premises relevant to personhood and relationships that underlies the social structure in which that system is enacted.

This presentation builds from a cultural perspective founded on Hymes’ (1962, 1972) conceptualization of speech communities and valued ways of speaking, developed further in speech codes theory (Philipsen, 1992, 1997; Philipsen et. al, 2005). Specifically, I take the discursive force position – that cultural norms are connected to action by way of predictions and explanations of talk about norm-governed behavior – as the basis for exploring differentiation of intentions from interpretations of personal address. I draw from previously published ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Colombia, as well as more recent data, to illustrate five possibilities for interpretation and evaluation of personal address behavior that diverges from expectation: ignorance, incompetence, innovation, transgression and resistance.
Men only use *tú* for romance and tenderness.

Using *tú* is for upper class people.

*Tú* is a regional tradition.

*Tú* signals a close, trusting relationship, though not always sincerely.

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  - Speech events: *coger confianza* (catch trust), *ponerse confianzudo* (get too chummy).

1: “I started using *T* with my father when I was in my teens, to have a closer relationship (*más confianza*) with him.”

2. “Did that store clerk just *T* me? I think they’re teaching them to do that with customers, and I hate it. I think it’s *confianzudo*.”
Two contradictions:

1. Reported vs. observed T/V use (participant: “I never learned to tutear so I never do it” – researcher: oh yes you do)

2. Intention vs. interpretation (to catch trust vs. to get too chummy)
Explanations for contradiction #1:

- Self-reports are often inaccurate.
- Social desirability inhibits honesty of self-reports.
- There is a divide between intention and interpretation (contradiction #2.)
Speech codes theory and discursive force:

- Communication is culturally situated, i.e. located in particular times, places, and groups of people.

- Cultural norms are *used*, not followed, to interpret, evaluate, and shape communicative actions.

- To the extent X is a norm, discourse about conduct relevant to X can be predicted and explained.

Philipsen, 1992, 1997, 2005
The pragmatic divide between intention and interpretation
1. Conduct will be more often noticed and attended to when it is unexpected, even more so when it is considered deviant.

2. Discourse relevant to cultural norms can come from social actors, usually as expressions of intention, and from others, as description, interpretation, and/or evaluation.
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- Accounts (apologies, explanations, justifications, excuses)
- Gossip
- Advice
- Other narratives

3. Actors will not always be able or willing to articulate the “actual” motives behind their conduct.

4. Observation and evaluation of normative conduct are rarely disinterested (i.e. both relational partners and critics have vested interests) and therefore are rarely neutral.
5. Accounts, interpretations, and evaluations of action change over time; a retrospective account will incorporate potential social judgments.

6. All discourse that aligns conduct with norms, either positively or negatively, must be framed within a particular vocabulary of motives (e.g. cultural terms for talk.)

Burke, 1945
Carbaugh, 1989
5 evaluations of unexpected address term use:
The usual assumption of intercultural communication and small children

Ex. Can I *tutear* Mariela? (longtime manicurist who makes house calls lasting 5-6 hours) YES.

Can I *tutear* don Henry? (one-time service provider who came twice, for one hour each time) NO

NOTICE: Two service providers making house calls to a middle-class Bogotá apartment. T/V expectations differ in ways children and foreigners may not be held responsible for knowing.
2. Incompetence: Knows the norm but is not able to achieve correct performance.

Middle-class male, age 60, Bogota: “I don’t use T because I never learned it in school. If I tried I’d sound like don Chinche” (popular comedy series in the late 1980’s; working-class character tried to sound more worldly by use of T, made comical errors of pronoun/verb agreement)

NOTE: Second language learners will be judged more leniently than native speakers. T/V verb agreement errors will be interpreted as normal for language progression, not lower class status or attempt to hacerse de café con leche (put on airs)
3. Creativity/innovation

Personal address example: Upper class female, Bogota, age 35, hailing female friend: “Mugre!” (dirt, i.e. somos como uña y mugre – “we’re as close as fingernails to dirt”)

Example: On an invitation to a silver wedding anniversary dinner: Favor de no traer regalos, su presencia sera nuestro mejor obsequio (Please no gifts, your being there will be our best present)

Common in the US, unheard of in Colombia. Comment from male, Bogota, middle class, 45: “I think that’s why everyone you invited came!”

NOTICE: Some deviations from norms are evaluated quite positively. Relational codes (Fitch, 2003) are fertile ground for this, though there is rarely an effect on cultural norms.
King Juan Carlos of Spain, to Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela:

“Porqué no te callas?”
“Why don’t you (T) shut up?”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWe01kvfpG0

The “tú” heard around the world:

- Could not be claimed as ignorant or incompetent
- Interpretation as insult, plus public nature, marks this as transgression
5. Resistance

Challenges to cultural norms, e.g. by way of social drama, in ways that call them into question.

Ex: Appropriation of address terms:
Colombia: marica (queer)
US: bitch

Transgression is one-time, unique event; resistance is process, over time, of change. Both are understood to be intentional.
Conclusion:

The payoff of a correlational view is tracking and comparison across time, national languages, dialects, within cultures as opposed to intercultural contexts.

The payoff of a cultural view centered on moments of pragmatic divergence is insight into the rhetorical, strategic, and creative dimensions of language use.
Bibliography


