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Moving towards the realm of the other: second-person objectivization in Spanish media discourse



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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the use of Spanish nonspecific second-person subjects in oral mass-media—radio and TV—discourse as a grammatical choice endowed with a communicative potential. Traditionally-termed generic or impersonal second persons are prompted by an intention to de-subjectivize some propositional content by indexically detaching it from the particular circumstances of the speaker. In order to more clearly formalize this value, the label *objectivizing second persons* is proposed. Their choice in the domain of mass communication is shown to be aimed at the accomplishment of a variety of goals, sometimes including manipulation of the audience. An analysis is conducted of the frequencies with which objectivizing second-person subjects occur across different oral mass-media genres, as well as across speakers classified according to their socioprofessional ascription and sex/gender. It is concluded that the distributional patterns observed reflect the differential preference for the discursive meaning of the resource under study and its possible repercussions on speakers' images. Tackling the fact that formal choice is intrinsically linked to the generation of meaning may contribute to the development of a comprehensive, explanatory model of syntactic variation.

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1. Introduction. The singular second person as a meaningful grammatical choice

A scientific and explanatory model of variation and choice in language begs for the acknowledgment of the intrinsically meaningful nature of linguistic forms and structures. Whenever speakers opt to say something, they are creating some meaning within some context. Approaches to variation as the option of “saying the same thing in several different ways” (Labov, 1972:271), even if they may have proved well suited for the study of phonological phenomena with no repercussions on utterance meaning, became problematic as soon as morphosyntactic and discursive facts started to be analyzed from the same viewpoint (Lavandera, 1978; Romaine, 1984), since it is always possible to suspect that speakers are not really communicating the same with all variants. Variation encompasses, in fact, the much wider potential of saying different things in different ways (Aijón Oliva and Serrano, 2013:19–23), and linguistic choice is primordially driven by communicative needs and intentions.

From this perspective, the choice of clause subjects across discourse can readily be approached as a matter of variation. It is quite evident that, rather than being a merely formal phenomenon, such a choice will establish a particular viewpoint of discourse, which in turn will strongly condition how the latter is interpreted.

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In Spanish, pronoun subjects do not necessarily index a constant personal reference; in each discursive context, they may identify with a specific person or rather extend their reference to others, who may or not be present in the communicative situation. Notably, second-person singular *tú* ‘you’ frequently transcends its deictic reference (i.e. the indexation of a particular interlocutor) towards a more generic or nonspecific one. This use has traditionally been labeled as *nonspecific*, *impersonal* or *generalizing* (Enríquez, 1984; Hidalgo Navarro, 1996–1997; Kany, 1969:29; Kitawa and Lehrer, 1990; Kluge, 2010; Seco, 1989:374), or even as *deliberately non-agreeing* (Gili Gaya, 1976:33).

The aim of the present study is to analyze such nonspecific singular second-person subjects in Spanish—variably formulated through the pronoun *tú*—from the viewpoint of their inherent cognitive meaning and of how the choice of this meaning in discourse affects the construction of communicative style. Styles will be understood as tendencies to make particular meaningful choices—not just linguistic ones, but of any semiotic system—whereby speakers can construct certain self-images or identities (Auer, 2007; Coupland, 2007; Schilling, 2013:155–172) and/or attain any desired goals, taking into account the social and situational features of the context.² Styles, though stemming from social interaction, should be explainable in cognitive terms (Aijón Oliva and Serrano, 2013), since meaning itself does not exist outside cognition. The description and explanation of styles will be more precise the more numerous and diverse meaningful choices can be demonstrated to serve the construction of an analogous style (cf. Biber and Conrad, 2009). However, in the present state of knowledge it seems safe to restrict analyses to quite specific linguistic traits that can be exhaustively analyzed, such as the one we will be dealing with.

First of all, it is important to point out that the nonspecific second-person subject is frequent in contexts where facts related to the speaker rather than the addressee are dealt with. Whereas the first person might appear as the more usual choice in many of such cases, a second-person subject will expectably be interpreted as indexing not just the addressee or, in other words, as referentially nonspecific, as in the following example:

- (1) Queremos valorar el resultado de este telescopio\ cuando Ø haces una cosa de esta Ø tratas de usar al máximo la herramienta que tienes\ y Ø limitas el uso de otras máquinas nuevas\ pero siempre hay algo que Ø puedes aprovechar\ (CEEC Med12<GayCent310>)³

‘We want to evaluate the performance of this telescope. When *you* fabricate something like this *you* try to make the most of the device, just as *you* restrict the use of other new machines; but there is always something *you* can take advantage of.’

The notion of a ‘covert *I*’ has been put forward in order to describe strategies of this sort (Kluge, 2010:1111). The speaker carries out a displacement from the singular first person to the second one (Briz, 1998:56), probably in order to avoid direct responsibility for what is said, but also to secure the involvement of the audience (Haverkate, 2004; Hernanz Carbó, 1990:163; Serrano, 2006:69–70).

The phenomenon has also been put in connection with generic or impersonalizing grammatical choices such as *uno* (‘one’) or the verbal clitic *se* (Flores Ferrán, 2009; Guirado, 2011:28). However, they all can hardly be considered synonymous; if morphosyntactic form is assumed to be inherently meaningful, the choice of a second-person subject will imply a particular way for utterances to be interpreted. What makes it different from other linguistic choices conveying genericity or impersonality is that speakers intend to present the content of discourse as independent from their personal circumstances, but at the same time as allegedly attributable to their audience, so it cannot be interpreted as completely impersonal (cf. Hugo Rojas, 2011:162).⁴

Also, if grammatical forms are seen as indissolubly linked to their meanings, it makes little sense to assume the existence of *canonical*—i.e. specific—vs. *deviant*—nonspecific—uses of the second person, as descriptive grammars have sometimes suggested (Hidalgo Navarro, 1996–97:172–174; Kany, 1969:29; Seco, 1989:374).

The choice of this grammatical person always implies the anchoring of discourse in the perspective of an actual or ideal addressee. That is, there are not really two different types of second persons, but just one encapsulating the general notion of ‘the other’.⁵ The second-person subject has an inherent meaning—the establishment of the other as the primary viewpoint from which an event is watched—, but its actual reference and its meaningful repercussions are variably constructed and emerge in discourse and interaction. When it appears amidst the discussion of contents related to the speaker, it seems to be prompted by an intention to dissociate such contents from his/her particular circumstances, opinions or values, extending them to a wider audience, as in the following example:

² The notion of *identity* comprises the multiple and evolving forms of self-presentation in social contexts (Coupland, 2007:3, 23–24). There is not just one self for each person; people in their social lives can be compared to actors playing different roles, sometimes with remarkable versatility. This is actually accomplished through communicative styles.

³ See Section 2.1 for the identification and general description of the corpora used in this study.

⁴ Even though we will sometimes speak of communicative *intention* on the part of speakers, and we characterize linguistic variants as *choices*, intentionality is a highly complex and debatable matter. Many communicative choices are largely unconscious (Sankoff, 1988:154) and common speakers will find it difficult to explain them a posteriori if requested to. The crucial point for any usage-based linguistic approach should be the fact that speakers are always communicating something, whether they consciously want to or not. This can also be applied to the fundamental question of style construction, which is partly agentive but also partly conditioned by contextual factors.

⁵ In this sense, for example, Bresnan and Hay (2008:249) categorize *generic* uses of English *you* as ‘situationally evoked’, i.e. contextually accessible or salient, just as they do with specific ones, assuming that the former “include the hearer semantically”.

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