

# The Acquisition of *Tú* and *Usted* by English Speakers: A Study of Non-native Knowledge and Usage of Forms of Address

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## **Abstract**

This study is an attempt to trace the tendencies of L2 learners of Spanish in identifying the explicitly alien distinction between the pronouns *tú* and *usted*. This "T/V" distinction is an important factor in social communications given the two pronouns' differing connotations, the "T" pronoun, *tú* being more casual, while the "V" pronoun *usted* being more formal. Here I overview the survey responses of three groups of students (native, advanced, and intermediate speakers) to find patterns in the usage of the two pronouns in various types of requests differentiated by different social factors. Participants are given hypothetical situations in which they must press a request to another speaker, each situation with either a power gap between speakers, a unfamiliarity or a particularly grave request. They are asked to reply with the pronoun they would more likely use in every case.

It is found that advanced and intermediate students have a generally good grasp of natives' usage of the pronouns at least in recognition of proper usage, yet generalization remains difficult due to a small sample size and perhaps the recognition-based methodology. It is also found that a power gap between the speakers universally elicits the use of the *usted* pronoun, while the gravity of a request does not make a speaker more likely to use the same pronoun

instead of *tú*. There is a variance in both native and non-native speakers as to whether or not unfamiliarity between speakers requires the usage of *usted*.

Additionally I review the theoretical, cognitive and cultural possibilities of an extension of this result and comment on their ramifications with suggestions for further research.