

## Article

# Después de usted: Variation and Change in a Spanish Tripartite Politeness System

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on the address paradigm in the Spanish spoken in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, a Latin American variety which presents speakers with three options—one polite (*usted*), and two familiar (pan-Hispanic *tú* and regional *vos*). Recent quantitative studies have shown that the range of polite *usted* is shrinking in the dialect, as younger respondents reserve it for hierarchical contexts or for much older addressees. Indeed, speakers are uncertain about appropriate address choice to convey deference without distance. The present analysis supplements the previous quantitative data with responses of Montevideo speakers to an attitudinal interview (n = 12) analyzed qualitatively for themes with *Atlas.ti*. It finds that while speakers reject *usted*, they have adopted a range of strategies to maintain distinctions in politeness, including address avoidance, mirroring, and the repurposing of *tú* as an intermediate polite form.

**Keywords:** Río de la Plata Spanish; Montevideo; tripartite address systems; formality/informality; variation and change



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## 1. Introduction

In languages that present speakers with options to address an interlocutor, the choice between these forms provides clues about interpersonal relationships, relative status, and subjective attitudes. Moreover, social change can be gaged through the evolution of address acceptability between different types of speakers. For example, Western European languages with a binary formal/informal distinction have undergone a gradual expansion of the latter at the expense of the former (Brown and Gilman 1960; Clyne et al. 2009). In earlier periods, relative power regulated pronoun use, with equals exchanging symmetric pronouns (T-T, V-V), and non-equals marking their status differences through asymmetric address (T-V). For example, younger speakers might have used formal forms with their elders within the family and received familiar forms in return. Over time, distance/closeness has become the main criterion in address selection, and formal forms have become reserved for those felt to be least like the speaker along several dimensions (age, class, professional affiliation, etc.). As societies have become less hierarchical and classes more porous, the circles of solidarity and informality in address have expanded.

Spanish has followed these general trends, both in its American and Peninsular varieties. On the formal pole, the earliest pronoun was *vos*, an etymological plural whose use as a deferential singular can be traced back to Latin *VŌS* (Penny 1991, pp. 123–25). However, this pronoun lost respectful value over time, and by the 17th century, it had been replaced by a Hispano Romance nominal address form, *Vuestra Merced* ‘your mercy’, whose phonetic erosion and grammaticalization resulted in present-day pronoun *usted* (De Jonge and Nieuwenhuijsen 2012). This form eventually generalized across social classes and most relationships (Koch 2008; Moreno 2002), except when addressing small children or the lowest social ranks, who received the second person singular *tú* (<Lat. TU). Over time, though, *usted* has receded in the face of increased social acceptance of informal *tú*, both in Spain and America (Lara Bermejo 2020; Lastra de Suárez 1972; Molina Martos 2002, 2020), although not necessarily at the same rate (Schwenter 1993).

It would be a simplification to interpret the retreat of formal pronouns such as *usted* as merely a decrease in overall politeness, because address pronouns are polite or not depending on whether they are appropriate to the context of interaction (Blas Arroyo 1994). Indeed, politeness, defined as a set of strategies that maximize the possibility of success of a communicative event, has both positive and negative facets (Brown and Levinson 1987). Positive politeness includes strategies that satisfy the need for interpersonal connection and closeness (e.g., complimenting), while negative politeness is based on respecting individual autonomy and independence (e.g., granting privacy). Thus, in some interpersonal relations, the unmarked polite address will be familiar, while in others, it will be formal or distant. For example, two unacquainted middle-aged people who meet on an elevator may exchange formal address (negative politeness), but upon discovering that they are headed to the same party, they will naturally switch to informal options (positive politeness), more appropriate for the solidarity implicit in sharing a friend and the same social circles (Moyna and Blas Arroyo 2020, pp. 291–92).

Most of the theorization about address in European languages has been based on the assumption of binary pronominal options (e.g., German, French, Swedish), or on a two-way distinction between different appellatives, such as first names and titled surnames (e.g., English) (Brown and Gilman 1960; Clyne et al. 2009). However, address systems can be much more complex, since pronouns can interact with appellative nominals and/or verbs to create a much more nuanced reality (e.g., Austrian German's use of T pronouns with titles) (Clyne et al. 2009, p. 139). In addition, while in some cultures, tacit or explicit permission to use T pronouns cannot be withdrawn once granted, in others, the same interlocutors may on occasion 'retract' informality for pragmatic or emotional effect (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2003, p. 14). Lastly, in languages that contain more than two contrasting address forms, the informal/formal distinction is much harder to draw. Several Spanish dialects fall under this category, because their speakers have more than two pronouns to choose from.

### 1.1. Tripartite Address Systems in Spanish

While a detailed account of how all tripartite address systems came to be in American Spanish far exceeds the scope of this paper (cf. Moyna and Rivera-Mills 2016, pp. 1–8), a quick overview will help better interpret the data at hand. The conquest and settlement of America by Spain was contemporaneous with a period of great flux in address (Fontanella de Weinberg 1993, p. 145), to the extent that there was legislation to decree appropriate usage (Juárez Cabañas 2014; Moreno 2002). We have seen that in the formal pole, *Vuestra Merced* (>*usted*) prevailed, in the process winning out over alternatives. The formerly deferential *vos* did not disappear, but instead, came to occupy an ambiguous position, impinging on the pragmatic space of informal *tú*. Early colonial letter writers often combined *vos* and *tú* when addressing a single addressee, mixing and matching their corresponding verbs (Penny 2000, p. 151). Over time, areas in constant contact with the metropolis followed the lead of Peninsular Spanish in eradicating *vos* (Páez Urdaneta 1981). In other dialects, this form disappeared after a protracted period of gradual retreat over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, as shown by vestigial usage in Panama (Quilis and Graell Stanzola 1989), Cuba (Blanco Botta 1982), and Peru (Arrizabalaga 2001). By contrast, in areas neglected by the Spanish Crown, such as Central America and the Río de la Plata, the competition between *vos* and *tú* for the informal slot followed the opposite path, and it was in fact *tú* that receded, resulting in a formal/informal opposition between *usted* and *vos* (Fontanella de Weinberg 1999). In a subset of these *voseo*-retaining dialects, the competition between *vos* and *tú* was never completely resolved, resulting in the preservation of both forms alongside *usted*.

Although it is almost impossible to generalize on the relative status of *vos* and *tú* where they coexist across the vastness of the American continent, some general trends can be discerned (Moyna 2016, pp. 6–8). For example, *vos* tends to be typical of rural varieties, favored by men, working class speakers, and in contexts of intimacy and informality. *Tú* is

the prestige form typical of polite urban society, disseminated by the educational system, and preferred by the upper classes and women. In other words, although *vos* and *tú* are both ‘informal’, they almost always convey some additional social information, and their coexistence with *usted* gives rise to pronominal systems that provide speakers with additional expressive and pragmatic nuances. We now turn to the specific description of the tripartite address of Montevideo Spanish (henceforth MSp), with a focus on the formal/informal distinction.

### 1.2. Address in Montevideo Spanish (MSp)

The dialect spoken in Uruguay has long been recognized as exhibiting a tripartite system, and this is especially true of its capital, Montevideo (Behares 1981; Bertolotti 2011, 2016; Bertolotti and Coll 2003; Elizaincín and Díaz 1981; Fontanella de Weinberg 1999; Mendoza 2005; Moyna forthcoming; Steffen 2010). *Tú* and *vos* have been entangled in a competition across the singular informal pronominal paradigm since colonial times, although early evidence is limited due to the scarcity of informal address in personal letters (Bertolotti 2016; Moyna and Vanni Ceballos 2008). Both paradigms mixed during the late 18th and early 19th century (Bertolotti 2016), but by the early 20th century, they had merged into a local spoken norm that retained pronominal and verbal forms of both *tuteo* and *voseo* (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Formal address pattern contrasted against the bipartite informal *tuteo* pattern and Montevideo’s informal paradigm. N.B.: Only three-way contrasts have been included.

	Formal	Informal	
		Montevideo Mixed Paradigm	<i>Tuteo</i> Paradigm
<b>Pronouns</b>			
Subject	usted	vos/tú	tú
Prep. Object	[a] usted	[a] vos/ti	[a] ti
Comitative	[con] usted	contigo/con vos	contigo
<b>Verbs</b>			
Imperative	tome	tomá	toma
Pres. Indic.	toma	tomás	tomas
Pres. Subj.	tome	tomes	tomes
Neg. Imper.	tome	tomes/tomés	tomes
Preterite	tomó	tomaste/tomastes	tomaste

The formal paradigm of Montevideo does not differ from that of the rest of the Spanish-speaking world. In the pronouns, informal forms can vary in three specific slots, namely, the subject (*¿Vos vas?/¿Tú vas? ‘Are you<sub>V/T</sub> going?’*), the prepositional object (*Esto es para vos/ti ‘This is for you<sub>V/T</sub>’*) and the comitative form, which may be synthetic (*Voy contigo ‘I’m going with you<sub>T</sub>’*) or analytic (*Voy con vos ‘I’m going with you<sub>V</sub>’*). The remainder of the pronominal paradigm is identical to that of *tuteo* (e.g., possessive: *tu [casa] ‘your [house]’*; object: *te miro ‘I see you’*, etc.). In some verb forms, such as the imperative or the present indicative, there is little or no variation, with oxytonic *vos* forms prevailing. In others, such as the present subjunctive and the preterite, the forms employed can be affected by speaker gender, social class, and educational level. The fact that younger speakers are more likely to prefer *voseo* variants overall is evidence of change in progress in favor of the vernacular (Moyna forthcoming).

In some slots of the paradigm, the *voseo/tuteo* alternation is used to express pragmatic intent. For example, *tuteo* forms are practically categorical in the present subjunctive when used in epistemic subordinate clauses (*No me parece que vengas ‘I don’t think you will come’*), while *voseo* forms are possible with deontic semantics, such as negative imperatives, both direct (*No vengas/vengás ‘Don’t come<sub>T/V</sub>’*) (Fontanella de Weinberg 1979) and indirect (*Te dije que no vengas/vengás ‘I told you not to come<sub>T/V</sub>’*). More recent investigation has shown that *voseo* is more frequent in cessative negative imperatives (*No cantés ‘Stop singing!’*),

while it is less likely in preventive negative imperatives (*No cantes* ‘Don’t start singing’) (Johnson 2016). The role of pronominal *tú* as a mitigator in face-threatening speech acts has also been shown (Moyna 2020). When presented with directives with different levels of imposition, Montevideo speakers were significantly more likely to claim they used *tú* when the speech acts were most face threatening (e.g., commands), and less likely to choose that form in less face-threatening directives (e.g., suggestions). In other words, although *tú* and *vos* are often used in variation, they are not exactly equivalent.

For its part, *usted* has occupied the formal slot since colonial times, when it was used categorically in asymmetric relations and as a preferred option in symmetric relations. It only started to lose ground over the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, first within urban families and later in their rural counterparts. By the mid-20th century, *usted* was no longer used among unacquainted young speakers (Ricci and Malán de Ricci 1977), and by the late 20th century, it was restricted to white collar workplaces and asymmetric relations on the shop floor and education institutions (Behares 1981).

A quantitative study with Rbrul based on reported use in a set of asymmetrical or distant relationships showed the further retreat of *usted* in the 21st century (Moyna 2019). Thus, while over half of respondents claimed to use *usted* in these relationships, they did so to varying degrees. Participants were most likely to report employing it with unknown older addressees (84.6%), followed by professionals with authority (74.3% for a school principal; 74.7% for a doctor). By contrast, the workplace appeared as a domain where informal pronouns were very frequent, even when addressing superiors, showing that familiarity is due to frequency of contact (36.3% and 43% *usted* use, with a female supervisor and a male boss, respectively). The study also showed that although the differences in *usted* choice among age groups were not large, they were statistically significant: speakers under the age of 30 were the most likely to choose informal options, exclusively or in variation with *usted*.

There is some initial evidence that one of the reasons for the retreat of *usted* may be increasing discomfort with the level of distance it implies and the ambiguity of some social relationships. For example, respondents were quite divided about how to address domestic workers (61% formal, 32.5% informal, 6.5% mixed), who are both physically close and often long-term employees, but also socially distant from their employers. In addition, in a section left open for comments, several participants added spontaneous metalinguistic observations about the problematic aspects of the formal/informal dichotomy. For instance, even in cases of marked age or hierarchical differences, respondents viewed *usted* as potentially unfriendly (Moyna 2019, pp. 213–14). They mentioned that variation was often based on personal relationships rather than social status, and that these could change over time; for example, if they knew a doctor, they would address him differently than if they did not. Finally, some admitted to insecurity due to the effect of contradictory forces (respect vs. closeness), which led them to avoid address forms if they could.

The purpose of this study is to investigate further what attitudes speakers of MSp have towards the retreat of formality in their dialect. In particular, it addresses the following questions:

1. What sociopragmatic factors do speakers recognize in determining the use of formal/informal address?
2. What attitudes do they have regarding formal and informal address forms?
3. What is the outcome of the retreat of formal *usted* in terms of maintenance or loss of politeness distinctions?

The third question concerns specifically whether distinctions of politeness are being lost from obligatory categories (i.e., pronouns and verbal inflections), and/or whether speakers resort to alternative strategies to retain the politeness distinction. This appears as a distinct possibility, given the two informal pronominal options in the dialect.

## 2. Method

*Interview format and administration.* For the purposes of this study, it was decided that qualitative interviews would result in richer and more nuanced information than surveys. The open-ended interview protocol included pre-planned questions about usage and attitudes towards pronominal, verbal, and nominal (appellative) address. Although the questions were written in a script, they were presented in the order that optimized the flow of each conversation, and follow-up questions were added when appropriate. The interviews covered more topics than those relevant to the current study, including some that have been addressed separately (e.g., appellatives in [Moyna 2017](#)). Questions relevant to variation and change in formality included: (a) reported address use in different domains and contexts (e.g., *¿Usted emplea formas como usted tiene? ¿Con quién las emplea típicamente? ¿Hay alguien con quien no emplee estas formas? 'Do you use forms such as you have? Who do you use them with? Is there anyone with whom you do not use these forms?'*); (b) judgements about and attitudes towards appropriate address use (e.g., *¿Hay alguien que lo conozca muy bien y lo trate de usted? ¿Cómo se siente usted al respecto? 'Is there anyone who knows you really well and addresses you as usted? How do you feel about that?'*); (c) pragmatic motivations for shifting between formal and informal address (e.g., *¿Ha notado algún cambio en la forma en que lo tratan otros a lo largo de su vida? 'Have you noticed any changes in the way others have addressed you over the course of your life?'*).

The interviews were conducted between July and August of 2012, and most of them were individual, with one exception, where a pair of interviewees were recorded together for convenience. Interviews lasted between 20 min and an hour and were recorded with a Marantz PDM 620 digital recorder.

*Participants.* The participants were found through snowball recruitment methods, starting from the interviewer's own social networks in Uruguay. A total of 60 participants were interviewed in various cities, including 17 from Montevideo. However, this study reports exclusively on 12 of those Montevideo interviewees, whose responses have been fully analyzed. Of them, seven were women, and five were men, distributed more or less evenly by age group: four in the 18–30 age group (2M, 2F); four in the 31–50 age group (1M, 3F); and four aged 51 or over (2M, 2F).

*Interviewer.* It should be noted that the interviewer was also a speaker of MSp, although at the time of the interviews, she had spent almost two decades abroad. This gave her a double role, both as a one-time insider in the community, with recollections of her own past, and also as an outsider, who had missed changes that had taken place since she had left. Thus, she drew from her past experience and from gaps in her knowledge to construct questions and also to elicit information.

*Transcription and coding.* All recordings were transcribed using a professional service (*CaptionSync*), and the transcriptions were checked by the researcher for accuracy. They were then coded in *Atlas.ti*, a qualitative data analysis software that allows for searches of specific words and sequences, and for the quick identification of pertinent quotations. The labels used for coding were developed using a bottom-up approach: any pertinent quote was coded with the greatest level of detail possible. These quotes were then grouped into categories created inductively, following a grounded theory approach ([Charmaz 2006](#)). The results section summarizes the general tendencies, and highlights some consistent differences in usage or attitudes between the different age and gender groups of participants.

## 3. Results

Overall, the interviews revealed that, for the respondents, informal address has displaced *usted* almost categorically in the family domain, and that it has also receded in the school and work domains. Service encounters were areas of considerable variation. Participants also described contexts in which formal address continued to be appropriate, and those where they had noticed changes over time. In addition, they discussed what made formal and informal forms appropriate or inappropriate, and whether they had alternative means to express respect.

### 3.1. Sociopragmatic Factors Perceived as Determining Formal and Informal Address

The vast majority of participants claimed not to use *usted* in their family interactions, independently of generation (1). They were also quick to clarify that this was not perceived as lack of respect among next-of-kin (2). It should be noted, however, that some respondents expressed more ambiguity when it came to some more peripheral family relationships, such as in-laws. Both men and women describe instances of formal address in those interactions, exclusively or alternating with informal address (3, 4). This suggests that the family is in fact a complex domain, with kin relations occupying a more intimate circle than connections acquired later, through marriage.

1. Más bien con mis hijos, y mi esposo, ponele, Y con la familia más allegada a mí. (Sonia, F2)  
'[I use informal address] Typically, with my children and my husband, for example. And with my closest family members'<sup>1</sup>
2. Siempre mi madre me incentivó a tratar de respetar a las personas mayores, o lo que sea; pero en mi familia, nunca pasó que a mi abuelo le tengamos que decir usted [ . . . ] (Cecilia S, F1)  
'My mother always encouraged us to be respectful to older people, or whatever; but inside the family, I never had to address my grandfather with *usted*.'
3. Mis abuelos usaban el usted [ . . . ] mi abuela por parte de mamá, a su yerno le decía usted.' (Roberto, M2)  
'My grandparents used *usted* [ . . . ] my maternal grandmother used *usted* to address her son-in-law.'
4. No, [a mi suegra] la trataba de tú y usted: me salían las dos palabras. [ . . . ] Sí. Y eso que [inaudible] respeto tenía. (Sonia, F2)  
'With my mother-in-law I would use both *tú* and *usted*: both words would come out. [ . . . ] Yes, and that is [ . . . ] because I respected her.'

Within the school domain, there were differences in reported usage and attitudes according to educational level and generation. In elementary school, the oldest interviewees claimed to have been addressed with the standard informal pronoun *tú* while they were children, while they addressed teachers formally, with *usted*, and/or with the vocative *maestra* 'teacher', sometimes accompanied by first name (5). By contrast, the youngest participants stated that either informal form (*tú* or *vos*) could be exchanged between pupils and teachers (6). Variability was attributed to the size and type of school, where the more conservative usage was generally associated with parochial schools (7). Address choice was also seen as a function of the teacher's age and general demeanor (8).

5. Las maestras no se dirigían a mí tratándome de vos, tampoco de usted. [ . . . ] Es decir, utilizaban justamente el tuteo. (Elia, F3)  
'Teachers didn't address me using *vos*, or *usted* either [ . . . ] That is, they used *tú*, precisely.
6. En la escuela, nosotros siempre a los profesores les decíamos por el nombre. Ni siquiera era señorita o maestra tanto. Nada, nosotros era, no sé, Ana. [ . . . ] Sí, informalmente, No tengo recuerdo de tener que decirle [usted].' (Cecilia S, F1)  
'In school we always addressed teachers by their first names. Not even Miss or Teacher So-and-So, nothing. For us it was 'Ana' [ . . . ] Yes, informally. I have no recollection of having to use [usted].'
7. Cuando es ya más católico, la escuela o lugar, sí: usted y tú, y mucho respeto. (Sonia, F2)  
'When the [context] is more Catholic, the school or the place, yes: *usted* and *tú*, a lot of respect'
8. Y, según la maestra, porque a veces las maestras jóvenes te trataban de tú y las maestras de más edad te trataban de usted. (Sonia, F2)  
'Well, it depended on the teacher, because sometimes the young teachers called us *tú* and the older ones used *usted*.'

In high school, participants remembered being addressed with the formal *usted* and by surname, rather than first name (9, 10). With older speakers, this seemed to be a verbal ritual marking the transition out of childhood, while younger speakers only remembered the use of *usted* as a temporary retraction of informality for reprimands (11).

9. Te trataban de usted en el liceo, ¿te acordás? [ . . . ] Usted tiene que—, ¿no? Sí [inaudible]. Cuando decían “pase adelante, escriba la cosa en el pizarrón”—Sí, era así. (Dora, F3)  
‘They addressed you with *usted* in high school, remember? [ . . . ] You<sub>U</sub> have to . . . right? Yes. For example, they would say “come<sub>U</sub> to the front, and write<sub>U</sub> this thing on the blackboard.” Yes, that’s how it was.’
10. Pero, capaz que era más personalizado de cada profesor, ¿viste? No era un estándar. Capaz que algunos sí te decían de “usted” y otros “tú”, no me acuerdo. Pero el apellido, sí, obvio. (Roberto, M2)  
‘But maybe it was more specific to each teacher, right? There wasn’t a standard. Maybe some of them used *usted* and others *tú*, I don’t recall. But they used the surname, absolutely.’
11. Algunos profesores me dije . . . me llegaron a decir “usted” pero, porque ta, yo era medio desastre en conducta [risas], y se ve que . . . Eso sí me acuerdo: “Usted B., tatata . . . ” [ . . . ]  
Sí, sí, eso sí lo tengo presente. Y después así, cuando en un ámbito normal me parece que que, de “tú.” (Cecilia B, F1)  
‘Some teachers would call me *usted*, but, well, that was because I was quite unruly [laughter], and apparently . . . I do remember that: “You<sub>U</sub>, B., blahblahblah . . . .” Yes, I do remember that. But otherwise, I think the normal address was *tú*.’

Finally, in higher education, older speakers described more asymmetrical relationships, where they used *usted* with their professors, but were addressed informally in return (12). Younger speakers were more reluctant to adhere to that usage (13) and were less clear about the forms their professors used to address them (14), evidence that these norms are in a state of flux and that instructors seem to be hedging their bets through avoidance strategies, such as plural collective address.

12. No, no, nosotros, yo estudiante trataba a todos los profesores de usted. [ . . . ] Del profesor al estudiante, era, el, en general todos nos tuteaban. (Elia, F3)  
‘No, no, we . . . as a student I addressed all my professors as *usted*. [ . . . ] When professors addressed students, typically, they would use *tú*.’
13. Ni siquiera a un docente le digo usted. [ . . . ] Cuando asisto a una clase, por más estudios académicos y formación académica tenga, no creo o no considero, que si lo considero, quiero decir, una persona de mi respeto, no creo que le llame de usted. ¿De acuerdo? [ . . . ] El respeto, para mí, no pasa por usar usted. (Alejandro, M1)  
‘I don’t even address instructors as *usted*. When I attend a class, regardless of their academic credentials and studies they may have, I don’t think, I don’t consider that, if I feel, that is, that they are a person I respect, I don’t think I’ll call them *usted*. OK? [ . . . ] For me, respect does not require using *usted*.’
14. En general, no nos tratan—también nos llaman por los nombres: si se los aprenden, nos llaman siempre por los nombres. Ha pasado en casi todas las materias. [ . . . ] Capaz que el profesor de derecho de este año—sí, nos hubiera tratado de usted. Pero tampoco es que se dirija mucho a cada uno en particular. (Cecilia S, F1)  
‘In general, they do not address us—they will call us by our names: if they learn them, they will always use our names. It has happened in almost all courses. [ . . . ] Maybe our law professor this year, maybe he would have used *usted*. But it’s not as if he addresses each one of us individually much.’

In the workplace, participants described the loss of formal address, even among participants who described work environments as far back as the 1980s (15). The use of *usted* was considered necessary only in very restricted situations, such as to show deference

to the addressee's title or position in the presence of third parties (e.g., school visitors) (16), or because deference was an inherent aspect of jobs such as waiting tables or being a doorman (17).

15. [ . . . ] Y yo a mi personal los tuteaba; nos tuteábamos todos, ¿viste? (Dora, F3)  
'I used to address my subordinates using *tú*; we all addressed each other with *tú*, you know?'
16. O sea, cuando ella está con gente en el escritorio y yo le golpeo la puerta, ella me da permiso para entrar y yo le digo, le pregunto: ¿usted precisa algo? [Pero ¿si no hay gente?] No, le digo tú. (Sonia, F2)  
'That is, when she is with someone in her office and I knock on the door, and she lets me in, I will tell her, I will ask: Do you<sub>U</sub> need<sub>U</sub> anything? [Interviewer: But what if there is nobody there?] No, in that case I use *tú*.'
17. Estoy ahora, por ejemplo, trabajando en un edificio de portero y allí viste, allí tenés que dirigir buenas noches, señor, qué tal, cómo le va, no entrar en diálogo. [ . . . ] Ya ahí es respeto, con categoría. (Antonio, M3)  
'For example, now I am working at a building as the doorman, and in that situation, you must greet people with "Good evening, sir. How are<sub>U</sub> you<sub>U</sub>? How are<sub>U</sub> you<sub>U</sub> doing?" and not engage in a lot of talking. [ . . . ] You must be respectful and classy.'

However, informal address was not automatically triggered by the perceived solidarity of sharing a workplace, but rather, by continued contact over time (18). This may have been related to the fact that this participant was a janitor, and as such, he perceived teachers as having a different function and a higher status in the school. At the same time, he believed this to be a temporary gap, until a personal bond could develop to bridge it.

18. Ahora, por ejemplo, el grupo de maestros nuevos que vinieron ya más o menos va a haber un poco de distancia. "¿Qué tal? ¿Cómo anda?", nos dirigimos de distinta manera. (Antonio, M3)  
'Now, for example, with the group of new teachers who've come, there will be somewhat of a distance. "Hello, how are you<sub>U</sub>?" We talk to them differently.'

Finally, service encounters were described as contexts of considerable variation (19), but age of the customer seemed to be the prevailing criterion: unmarked address for younger customers was informal, while for older patrons, formality was preferred. Thus, interviewees of different ages recalled different salient aspects of their encounters. For the young interviewees, it was mostly formal address—described with the vocative *señora*, but meant to include the pronoun *usted* as well—that stood out as unusual and was viewed negatively (20). On the other hand, an older interviewee recalled being addressed informally, which she interpreted as a business ploy based on flattery (21). While she admitted that with some customers the strategy might work, she was quite unmoved.

19. Asumo que o me han dicho señora, alguna vez. (Risas) Eso sí me choca. No, pero, creo que cualquiera de las tres, que me digan en una tienda no me va a chocar. (Cecilia B, F1)  
'I would imagine that they have called me madam at some point. (Laughter.) That I *do* find shocking. No, but I think that at a store, I wouldn't be shocked by any of the three forms.'
20. Cuando iba a comprar algo— Así que te digan: señora, tal cosa. [Int: ¿Te choca eso?] Sí, horrible. Porque [risa] te sentís como una señora. (Cecilia S, F1)  
'When I went shopping. So, they may say: "Madam this or the other." [Int: Do you find that shocking?] Yes, it's horrible. Because [laughter] you feel like a madam.'

21. A mí no me compran; nadie me atrae canchereándome. Me causa risa. Me causa mucha risa. [Int: Tampoco te ofende–] No, no, para nada. De repente entrás en una boutique y te dicen “¡mirá, te queda bárbaro!” [ . . . ] Porque yo no lo voy a comprar porque tú te me hagas la piola [risa]. Yo lo voy a comprar porque sí me gusta o no me gusta, ¿no? Pero de repente alguna persona puede entrar a ese tipo de cosas, ¿no? (Dora, F3)

‘I can’t be flattered; nobody will persuade me by trying to act friendly. I think it’s funny. I think it’s very funny. [Int: So you’re not offended..] No, no, not at all. Maybe you go into the boutique and they will tell you “Look! It looks great on you!” [ . . . ] Because I’m not going to buy it just because you get all friendly with me [laughter]. I’m going to buy it depending on whether I like it or not, right? But that strategy might work with other people, maybe?’

To summarize, for MSp speakers, informal address was a hallmark of long-term relationships. This was clearest within the family, but it was also true of school and work environments. There were some ambiguous cases, such as older in-laws, or certain jobs or circumstances that precluded the closeness that would naturally develop over time. Service encounters differed from the other contexts in that the relationships are fleeting, and several confounding criteria can interact, so address choice typically defaulted to the criterion of age.

### 3.2. Attitudes and Appropriacy of Address Forms

From the interviews, it becomes apparent that in MSp, formal address has the pragmatic function of marking high levels of social distance, and participants often resorted to piling up several differences when describing triggers (e.g., age, gender, and/or social class, and lack of prior acquaintance). Thus, for example, a young woman described her hypothetical *usted* addressee as a senior, but she felt she needed to add that this would have to be someone she had not previously met (22). A middle-aged man included both age and gender as differences that would be necessary for him to deploy *usted* (23). Another young female participant could not imagine being addressed as *señora* ‘madam’, except by an interlocutor who was much lower in social class (24).

22. Con gente adulta, adulta me refiero que de tercera edad, que no conozco, seguramente que “usted.” (Cecilia B, F1)  
‘With adults, by adults I mean seniors, that I don’t know; in that case I would likely use *usted*.’
23. El usted lo puedo usar de repente para una señora mayor. (Roberto, M2)  
‘I can use *usted* maybe for an old lady.’
24. A mí que me digan señora . . . Pero es porque la gente que me lo está diciendo es de un nivel socioeconómico mucho más bajo que yo. Una persona de mi mismo nivel socioeconómico nunca me diría señora. (Cecilia S, F1)  
‘If someone calls me *señora* ‘madam’ . . . It’s because the people who are saying it are of a much lower social class than mine. A person of my own social class would never call me madam.’

The use of *usted* as a component of respectful interpersonal relations was, for the most part, considered unnecessary. Some contexts where ritualized or institutionally codified respect was the primary driver of formal address selection were discussed, such as the contradiction between age and authority in a young police officer. While the participant in (25) was clear about the rules she would follow (‘respect the uniform’), her hesitation (‘I don’t know’) indicated an internal conflict between clashing criteria.

25. [Un policía joven] pero está con la vestimenta del uniforme. No, ahí sí yo, qué sé yo, respetando su uniforme, su investidura, yo lo trataría de usted. (Marta, F2)  
‘[A young policeman] but he’s wearing his uniform. No, in that case, I don’t know, I would respect his uniform, his investiture, I would use *usted*.’

The older generations expressed awareness of changes in the range of *usted* over time, something that transpired from their references to the relaxing of usage rules among young speakers (26). Some of these speakers attributed these more rigid social interactions (27) to the political repression of the dictatorial regime (1973–1985).

26. [ . . . ] Antiguamente vos ibas a una tienda o a un local: ¿señora necesita algo? ¿necesitás algo? No te dicen más señora o joven, como que se fue perdiendo. (Marta, F2)  
 ‘In the past, you would go to a store or the mall: Madam, do you<sub>U</sub> need<sub>U</sub> anything? [Now it’s] Do you<sub>V</sub> need<sub>V</sub> anything? They no longer say madam or miss, it’s been lost.’
27. Yo hice liceo y la Universidad en la dictadura, en la dictadura era muy común el usted, como salvando<sup>2</sup> (sic) la distancia con los alumnos. (Roberto, M2)  
 ‘I went to high school and university during the dictatorship, and then it was common [for teachers] to use *usted*, as if they were creating a distance from students.’

Respondents’ attitudes about changes in formality were not clear-cut. Most thought informal address per se was not a problem, and explicitly described familiar forms as a source of positive affect (28). That said, some of the older interviewees did recount having to adjust to what they had at one point considered excessively informal address in the workplace (29), or they expressed dislike for insufficiently deferential address (30). Interestingly, the middle-aged school janitor responsible for the long discussion in (30) justified some changes, such as her use of familiar address towards teachers (*soy una persona mayor* ‘I’m a grown-up’), while objecting to its use by pupils. In other words, she was positioning herself as an age-peer in spite of her status difference, a privilege she did not believe should be extended to young children.

28. [Los niños] me tratan de Antonio, nada más. Antonio para todos lados. [ . . . ] Sí, Antonio, vení te precisa tal maestro [Ent: ¿Te gusta?] Me encanta. (Antonio, F3)  
 ‘[The children] call me Antonio, that’s it. Antonio everywhere. [ . . . ] Yes, “Antonio, come<sub>V</sub> the teacher needs you<sub>V</sub>. [Int: Do you like it?] I love it.”
29. Cuando ya entré al año a trabajar como docente, ella me pidió que la tuteara. Y a mí no me salía. Y un día me dijo “si tú no me tuteás, yo no te voy a hablar.” Entonces me forzó, porque yo le hablaba y ella no me contestaba.” (Dora, F3)  
 ‘The following year, when I started working as a teacher, she asked me to use informal address with her. And I just couldn’t do it. One day she told me: “If you don’t use informal address, I won’t talk to you anymore.” So she forced me, because I would talk to her and she wouldn’t answer.”
30. No, me parece que hay cosas que no deberían de cambiar nunca, por ejemplo, eso de tratar al maestro por igual . . . . no sé, a mí no . . . . que yo lo haga, bueno soy una persona mayor—que sé yo—es diferente, pero que el niño tutee al maestro, no sé, no lo veo correcto. (Marta, F2)  
 ‘No, I think that some things should never change, such as, for example, treating teachers as equals. I don’t know, I don’t . . . the fact that I do it is acceptable, I’m a grown-up, I don’t know, it’s different. But when a child uses informal address with the teacher, I don’t know, I don’t think that’s OK.”

The verb *tutear*, as used by lay speakers in (29) and (30), can mean using either of the informal pronouns (*tú/vos*) and/or their accompanying verb.<sup>3</sup> Most speakers did not distinguish spontaneously between the two forms; when they were asked specifically to contrast them, one interviewee described them as interchangeable (31). Another expressed quite prescriptive views about *vos*, describing it as offensive, and denying that he or his children used it in daily life (32). These views were not reflected in his own usage, as became evident when, halfway through the interview, this participant proceeded to greet and chat with a delivery boy using *vos*. The inaccuracy notwithstanding, his statement

pointed to a perception of differences between the values of both forms. While one might be inclined to dismiss the comments (32) as mere linguistic sanitization, other participants, who described themselves as *voseo* users, echoed at least some of these sentiments about its pragmatic value (33).

31. No, esteee, yo te digo que uso, que los uso alternativamente. [ . . . ] Y que no hay ninguna lógica. [ . . . ] Ponele yo puedo estar hablando con, con Miriam . . . y decirle “¿Miriam, vos tenés tal libro?” [ . . . ] Estee, o puedo decirle “Miriam, yo pienso que tú tenés que hacer tal cosa.” (Elia, F3)  
 No, I mean, I’m telling you that I use them alternatively. Y that there is no logic. Suppose I’m talking to Miriam, and I could tell her: “Miriam, do<sub>V</sub> you<sub>V</sub> have such and such a book?” Or I could tell her “Miriam, I think that you<sub>T</sub> have<sub>V</sub> to do something or other.”
32. Despreciativamente. Cuando tengo una situación despreciativa con una persona, puede ser que le diga “Vos sos tal cosa”, en vez de decir “Tú [inaudible]”, es como para atacar, más que nada, atacar verbalmente en una respuesta. A mis hijos también se les escapa de vez en cuando un vos, pero es hacia algo, vos estás haciendo algo mal. Entonces ahí es el vos. Cuando el hermano siente el vos, sabe que puede haber pelea entre hermanos. (Ricardo, M3)  
 ‘Offensively. When I have conflict with someone, maybe I’ll say “You<sub>V</sub> are a such and such” instead of saying “You<sub>T</sub> [inaudible]”. It’s used as a form of aggression, more than anything, to attack someone verbally. My children also will let slip out a *vos* from time to time, but it’s antagonistic, “you<sub>V</sub> are doing something wrong.” So that’s when you hear *vos*. When one brother hears *vos*, that could mean a fight with the other.’
33. El vos a veces es como muy fuerte. [ . . . ] Claro, sí. Es más, me parece como más, no agresivo, pero . . . yo no lo usaría. De la misma forma que a veces puedo decir una mala palabra, pero no soy una persona que viva diciendo malas palabras. (Cecilia S, F1)  
 ‘*Vos* sometimes is a little strong. [.] Of course, yes, it’s more, to me it sounds more . . . not aggressive, but . . . I wouldn’t use it. The same way that I may use a swear word, but I’m not a person who is constantly using swear words.’

To summarize, formal address was perceived as encoding high levels of interpersonal distance, typically over more than one social dimension. If this distance was deemed socially necessary, then *usted* seemed to operate as a negative politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson 1987), the pronominal equivalent of giving others physical space. This explains why some interviewees were reluctant to employ informal address in the workplace before personal closeness could develop. On the other hand, the continued use of *usted* may itself be perceived as an impediment to closeness, and as such, undesirable. In those situations, *tú* appears as a positive politeness strategy, suitable when closeness is accompanied by consideration. Finally, *vos* is seen as suitable primarily in the most intimate relationships, where formality, and sometimes even politeness, can be eschewed with no risk of fraying the relationship. The vast majority of older respondents pointed to a relaxing of formality over time, but very few decried the loss of *usted*, because most considered it mainly a marker of distance, not politeness. In the next section, we discuss what strategies, if any, these speakers describe using to make up for this loss.

### 3.3. Politeness Distinctions in the Face of Usted Disappearance

In dialects of Spanish with binary contrasts in address (*tú/usted*, *vos/usted*), the retreat of prescribed formal address leads irrevocably to the loss of grammatical (i.e., pronominal/verbal) marking of politeness (Calderón Campos and Medina Morales 2010). A tripartite system such as that of MSp offers different alternatives. One solution is for this dialect to follow the same path of elimination of contrasts, with pronouns *tú* and/or *vos* and their verbal forms continuing to be used more or less interchangeably, in wider and wider social circles, at the expense of *usted*. If that is the case, the question then becomes

whether speakers will develop politeness strategies through other linguistic means, such as lexical variation (e.g., vocatives, naming practices). The second option open to speakers of tripartite systems is for the remaining pronouns (*tú* and *vos*) to specialize by occupying different space, with one of them taking over at least some roles vacated as *usted* disappears. This would lead to a system that distinguishes politeness only in the pronominal slot, since MSp matches both *tú* and *vos* with a single set of verbs (Table 1). In general, the interviewees expressed reluctance to do away with politeness distinctions altogether, and in order to maintain them, they followed both of the paths described above. This is particularly salient among younger respondents, who are losing *usted* at the highest rates, as noted earlier (Moyna 2019).

We will start with the first of the two options presented, i.e., the use of non-pronominal strategies. These are especially necessary for speakers who claim to use *tú* infrequently, such as the young man in (34–35), who described quite elaborate strategies to circumvent the second person altogether. The first consisted of avoiding direct address entirely. For example, he imagined having to speak to someone older at a bus stop, and was quite deliberate about his attempts to avoid the second person (34). He also brought up a different scenario, where an older teacher had invited him to use informal address, but he just could not bring himself. Caught between his need to be respectful and his addressee's wish to be close, avoidance was his only possible way out (35).

34. No diría “¿Sabe usted si vino, o sabés, o tú sabés o vos sabés? Yo diría: “¿El ómnibus pasó?” [Risitas] Algo así. Trato de evitarlo siempre. (Marcelo, M1)

‘I wouldn’t say “Do you<sub>U</sub> know whether the bus came, or do<sub>V</sub> [you] know, or do<sub>V</sub> you<sub>T</sub> know, or do<sub>V</sub> you<sub>V</sub> know? I would say “Did the bus come?” [Laughter] Something like that. I try to avoid it at all costs.

35. Y si no también me ha pasado de, profesores que son grandes, personas ya de sesenta para arriba o más grandes, que yo les quiero hablar de usted, me hablan de vos y me dejan ahí como que yo digo “Yo que sé si estar hablándole de usted” porque quiero marcar el respeto, no sé, algo así. Y me habla de vos y como que me dice “No, pero, voseame, está todo bien” y yo ahí como que “No, no, viste” porque me da cosa y claro. Entonces ahí evito referirme, evito y ya está. (Risitas.) Quedo, quedo bien. (Marcelo, M1)

‘It has also happened to me that older teachers, people in their sixties or older, that I want to address as *usted*, but they use *vos* with me and then I don’t know what to do. I think to myself “I’m not sure if I should use *usted*” because I want to show respect, I don’t know, something like that. And he uses *vos*, and they say something like “No, it’s OK, you can call me *vos*, it’s all right” and then I’m like “No, just no” because it’s weird and so, in that case, I avoid address, I avoid it and that’s it. [Laughter.] I look good, I look good.’

A second strategy, proposed by the same participant (36), and echoed by others (37), was leaving the choice up to the interlocutor and following their lead (cf. ‘receivers’ in Clyne et al. 2009, p. 78). In the absence of certainty regarding the appropriacy of formal or informal address, these speakers were likely to choose reciprocity. By doing so, they eliminated several potential minefields, e.g., offending by highlighting age differences, or seeming overfamiliar in service encounters.

36. La distancia la marca en ese caso la otra persona. Ya ahí, si me ve, me trata de usted ya sigo de usted. Si es un médico, me trata de usted yo sigo de usted, y si me trata de vos un médico, como que (risa) no me animo al usted pero como que ando ahí. (Marcelo, M1)

‘Distance in that case is marked by the other speaker. In that case, if they address me with *usted*, I will use *usted*. If it’s a doctor, if he uses *usted* [with me] I will use *usted* [with him] and if he addresses me with *vos*, maybe I won’t be brave enough to use *usted*, but I will be near.’

37. “Tú, Claudia.” Como ella me trata de tú también, yo la trato como ella me trata a mí. (Sonia, F2)  
 ‘[I call her] “You<sub>T</sub>, Claudia” since she also uses *tú* to address me; I address her the same way she addresses me.’

Some participants also followed the second option presented, i.e., the rearrangement of *tú* and *vos* as carriers of new politeness values. Several interviewees presented *tú* as a ‘Goldilocks’ pronoun, i.e., just right for many tricky contexts. For the older speakers, it was described as a useful distancing strategy, that is, less close than *vos* (38), while for the younger ones, it was seen as a way to avoid *usted* (39). This suggests that different age groups have different rationales for choosing *tú*, but in both cases, this form is an ideal in-between option to avoid socially fraught situations.

38. Sí, en el trato con los niños: tú o . . . No, nunca los trato de vos o che, no. No, no, porque no son ni mis hijos ni algo muy allegado a mí. (Sonia, F2)  
 ‘Yes, when I address the children: *tú* or . . . no, I never address them as *vos* or *che*, no. No, because they are not my children or close to me.’
39. Si es una persona mayor, le digo tú porque no me gusta mucho . . . A veces prefiero tutear que tratar de usted; depende de la persona, pero . . . Entonces, y sí, le digo tú, nunca le diría vos. [Int: Ajá. Y ¿por qué tenés esa especie de reticencia a usar usted?] No, porque a veces me suena como que es demasiado formal y—Me suena raro en mí decirle—Uso la forma más formal, pero igual sigo tutéandola. Eso sí lo hago sumamente consciente. O si es una persona mayor en el ómnibus, igual le trato de tú, pero con un poco más de formalidad. No llevo a usted porque me parece demasiado. (Cecilia S, F1)  
 ‘If it’s an older person, I use *tú*, because I don’t like [*usted*] very much . . . sometimes I prefer to use *tú* than *usted*; it depends on the person, but . . . Then, yes, I use *tú*. I would never address them with *vos*. [Int: I see. And why are you reluctant to use *usted*?] Well, because sometimes it sounds too formal, and . . . I feel strange saying . . . I use a more formal manner, but I still use *tú*. I do that very deliberately. Or with an older person on the bus, I’ll still use *tú*, but I will be more formal. I don’t go all the way to *usted*, because I think it’s too much.’

All in all, then, as *usted* has receded (cf. Section 1.2), the youngest speakers have had to grapple with what to do with the politeness distinctions it used to express. Most of them have found it difficult to simply obliterate politeness distinctions by replacing it with *vos*, the most frequent informal address pronoun for this age group (Moyna forthcoming). Some of them have opted to avoid direct address altogether, insofar as possible. Others play it safe by reciprocating forms with their interlocutors. Still, others have taken the two pre-existing informal address pronouns and specialized them for different addressees.

#### 4. Discussion

The main takeaway from this study is that the tripartite system of MSp is in a state of flux. The most formal form, *usted*, is becoming super-deferent and distant, and its domains are shrinking. When in the past speakers seemed to need reasons to use informal address, the tables have now turned, and it is formal address that seems marked, unusual, and in need of justification. We are seeing the tail end of *usted*’s long retreat, which started in the mid-19th century in contexts of affinity determined by familial ties, commonalities of age, gender, status, and/or class, and has now also been replaced in long-term relationships with frequent contact, even those marked by rank differences, such as in workplaces and educational institutions.

Social changes in Uruguay offer some context to understand linguistic changes. The country’s economic indicators over the last forty years have shown a steady increase in equality, such as significant drops in the GINI index (World Bank 2021). The resulting social mobility and flattening of social hierarchies correlate with a preference for informal address, which can more easily highlight commonalities. Thus, *usted* appears fraught,

because its use can be interpreted as the speaker's unwillingness to include the addressee in the ingroup, however defined. Speakers are not always clear on how many or which differences justify deploying it. For example, when the young females expressed discomfort at being addressed as *usted* (or *señora*), they knew age had not triggered the pronoun, and seemed reluctant to acknowledge the power asymmetry that favored them in the business transaction. Informal address can also appear overly informal, when it is deployed too early in the relationship or when interlocutors disagree on the social distance between them. However, most of the interviewees took no offense if addressed informally, as long as other linguistic markers of politeness were present.

That said, the shedding of formal address has not led to the disappearance of address politeness distinctions. Because the shift is in progress, speakers are forced to make quite deliberate pronoun usage choices that they can articulate metalinguistically. Even within a context of closeness, many speakers still need to carve out solutions based on degrees of deference. For the speakers who use *tú* the least (e.g., the young, particularly males), the two available pronouns (*usted* and *vos*) are potentially offensive, for different reasons. This leads to pronoun avoidance and mirroring strategies. Other speakers have repurposed *tú* and *vos*, to maintain two levels of politeness through pronouns.

This reorganization of the system is prefigured in differences between the two informal pronouns uncovered in prior quantitative research (Section 1.2). Moyna (2020) showed that, even in the context of close relationships, *vos* and *tú* are different in pragmatic function. *Tú* is more likely in more face-threatening acts (commands, requests) and less likely in less imposing acts (recommendations, enquiries). This tendency to modulate mitigation through address pronouns was clearest among the older women in the sample, and decreased in younger participants. The present interview data suggest a possible explanation for this intergenerational difference. The younger speakers seem to have reinterpreted a situationally induced alternation (same addressee, different illocutionary force) into an addressee-induced alternation (different addressee, same illocutionary force). Further research can confirm the path of this change.

Finally, this qualitative analysis should be expanded to the complete set of attitudinal interviews, including the five additional participants from Montevideo and 43 from other parts of the country. This will enrich the analysis and determine whether the responses provided by the twelve respondents reported on here are in fact reflected in those of the rest of the country, or whether attitudes towards the use of the three forms of address differ geographically.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Because the main objective of the glosses is to provide the meaning of the original quote, morphemic glosses were eschewed in favor of a semantic translation. The pronouns *usted*, *vos*, and *tú*, are left untranslated in metalinguistic references. If they are incorporated into quotations, they appear with the subscripts V (*vos*), T (*tú*) and U (*usted*). This is common practice in Spanish linguistics (see, for example, Moyna and Rivera-Mills 2016, p. 6), and was preferred to the more universally accepted marking of V as formal address, given the potential confusion with informal *vos*.
- <sup>2</sup> The participant misspoke: from the rest of the context, it is clear that he meant to say *creando* ‘creating’ or *exacerbando* ‘increasing’ distance, but he was attempting to use a formal register he did not normally use, and chose a formal word, *salvando* ‘bridging’, which was the opposite of what he meant.
- <sup>3</sup> *Vosear*, as used by linguists to describe the use of *vos* pronouns and the corresponding verbal paradigm, is not common among lay people.

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