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USING "YOU" IN ENGLISH AND "TÚ", "VOS", "USTED", "USTEDES" IN SPANISH: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Annotation: This article compares the English pronoun you with the Spanish second-person forms tú, vos, usted and ustedes. English has only one form for all situations: singular and plural, formal and informal. Spanish has several forms, and the choice depends on number, politeness, social distance and region. The article describes the main similarities and differences between the two systems, looks at verb agreement, object pronouns and possessives, and explains why this topic is difficult for learners of both languages. It also gives some practical ideas for the classroom.

Keywords: second-person pronouns, you, tú, vos, usted, ustedes, vosotros, T–V distinction, politeness, voseo, comparative analysis, language teaching

Personal pronouns are among the first words that students learn in a foreign language. The second-person pronoun is especially important, because it is the word we use to speak directly to another person. At first sight, this looks easy. In English, a learner says you to a friend, a teacher, a group of children or the president. In Spanish, the same learner must stop and think: Is this person a friend or a stranger? Is it one person or many? Am I in Spain, Mexico or Argentina?

Because of this difference, many Spanish speakers feel that English is "simple" and "neutral", while many English speakers feel that Spanish is "complicated". In fact, both systems express the same human needs: to address one person or several people, and to show the right level of closeness or respect. They solve these problems in different ways. English uses one pronoun and puts the social information in other words (names, titles, tone of voice). Spanish puts much of this information into the pronoun and the verb itself.

The aim of this article is to compare these two systems and to show where they are similar and where they are different.

1. The English pronoun you

In Modern English, you is the only second-person pronoun in standard use. It has the following features:

1. **One form for singular and plural.** You are my teacher. / You are my students.
2. **One form for subject and object.** You know me. / I know you.
3. **No formal–informal contrast.** We say you to a close friend and to a judge in a court.

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4. **Verb agreement is always plural.** We say you are, never you is, even when we speak to one person. The verb forms in the Present Simple are the same as for I, we and they: you work, you speak, you have.

5. **Special forms for possession and reflexive meaning.** your, yours, yourself (singular) and yourselves (plural). This is the only place where English marks the difference between one person and many.

The history of you explains this situation. In Old and Middle English there were two pronouns: thou (singular) and ye/you (plural). Later, you began to be used as a polite singular form, in the same way as French vous. Over time, the polite form became so common that it replaced thou in almost all contexts. Today thou survives only in religious texts, poetry and a few dialects.

Because standard English has lost the singular–plural difference, speakers have created new ways to make the plural clear. Some examples are you guys (very common in American English), y'all (Southern United States), youse (parts of Ireland, Australia and the United States) and yinz (Pittsburgh). These forms are informal and are usually not used in academic writing.

English you has one more important function: it can be **impersonal** (generic). In sentences such as You can't park here or You never know what will happen, you does not mean a specific listener. It means "people in general". This use is very frequent in spoken English and in instructions.

2. The Spanish second-person forms

Spanish has a richer system. The choice of form depends on three factors: **number** (one person or more), **formality** (close or respectful relationship) and **region**.

2.1. Tú

Tú is the informal singular pronoun. It is used with friends, family members, classmates, children and people of the same age or status. Using tú is called tuteo. The verb has its own ending: tú hablas, tú tienes, tú vives. Examples: ¿Cómo estás? (How are you?), ¿Tienes hermanos? (Do you have brothers or sisters?).

2.2. Vos

Vos is also an informal singular pronoun, but it is used instead of tú in many regions. This is called voseo. It is the normal form in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, and it is also widely used in most of Central America (for example, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica) and in some regions of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Chile. The verb forms are different from those of tú: vos hablás, vos tenés, vos vivís. The imperative is also different: hablá, tené, viví. In Argentina, ¿Cómo estás? is the same for tú and vos, but ¿Vos tenés tiempo? is typical of voseo, while ¿Tú tienes tiempo? is typical of tuteo.

It is important to remember that voseo is not "incorrect" Spanish. It is the standard informal form for tens of millions of speakers, and the Real Academia Española accepts it as a regular part of the language.

2.3. Usted

Usted is the formal singular pronoun. It is used with older people, strangers, customers, teachers, doctors and in official situations. It is often written Ud. or Vd. A very interesting grammar point is that usted uses the **third-person singular** verb: usted habla, usted tiene, usted vive. This is because usted comes from the old polite phrase vuestra merced ("your grace"), which was grammatically third person. Example: ¿Cómo está usted? (How are you? – formal).

2.4. Ustedes and vosotros

The plural system depends on the region:

- In **Latin America** and the Canary Islands, ustedes is the only plural form. It is used for both formal and informal situations, and the verb is third-person plural: ustedes hablan, ustedes tienen.

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• In **most of Spain**, there are two plural forms. Vosotros/vosotras is informal and takes the vosotros verb form (vosotros habláis, vosotros tenéis). Ustedes is formal.

So, a teacher in Mexico says ustedes to a class of children, but a teacher in Madrid will probably say vosotros.

3. Verbs, object pronouns and possessives

The differences are not only in the subject pronouns. They also appear in object pronouns, prepositional forms and possessive adjectives. The table below shows the main forms.

	Subject	Verb (hablar)	Object pronoun	After preposition	Possessive
Informal singular	tú	hablas	te	ti / contigo	tu, tus
Informal singular (voseo)	vos	hablás	te	vos	tu, tus
Formal singular	usted	habla	lo / la / le	usted	su, sus
Plural (Latin America; formal in Spain)	ustedes	hablan	los / las / les	ustedes	su, sus
Informal plural (Spain)	vosotros	habláis	os	vosotros	vuestro, vuestra
English (all cases)	**you**	**speak**	**you**	**you**	**your / yours**

Two points from the table are especially important for learners.

First, the possessive su is **ambiguous** in Spanish. It can mean his, her, its, their, your (formal singular) or your (plural). For example, su casa can be "his house", "her house", "their house" or "your house". Speakers solve this with context or with the phrase la casa de usted. English avoids this problem, because your always means you.

Second, the English forms are the same in all cases. The sentence I see you does not change if we speak to one person or to a hundred. In Spanish, the object pronoun changes with the formality and the number: Te veo (informal), Lo veo / La veo (formal), Los veo (plural).

4. Pro-drop and the use of subject pronouns

Another important difference is how often the pronoun is used. English is not a "pro-drop" language: the subject pronoun is almost always required. We say Do you speak English? and not Speak English? Spanish is a pro-drop language, because the verb ending already shows the person. So Spanish speakers usually say ¿Hablas inglés? without tú.

In Spanish, the pronoun tú or usted is used mainly for **emphasis** or **contrast**: Tú estudias, pero yo trabajo (You study, but I work), or to avoid confusion in the case of usted, because the verb habla can mean he, she or you (formal). In English, the pronoun is needed in all cases, so learners from Spanish-speaking backgrounds often forget it and say mistakes such as *Is very nice instead of It is very nice or *Are you ready? correctly but *Have time? incorrectly.

5. Politeness and social meaning (the T–V distinction)

Linguists use the term **T–V distinction** (from Latin tu and vos) for languages that have two different second-person pronouns for close and respectful relationships. In their well-known study, Brown and Gilman (1960) explained that these pronouns express two social ideas: **power** (the

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"higher" person says V, the "lower" says T) and **solidarity** (people who are close use T). Spanish is a typical T–V language. Modern English is not, even though it was in the past.

In Spanish, using the wrong form can have social consequences. Using tú with an older stranger can sound too direct or even rude. Using usted with a close friend can sound cold or ironic. Usage also changes by country and by family. In Colombia and Costa Rica, for example, some speakers use usted even with close relatives and with children, to show affection or respect. In Spain, young people use tú almost everywhere, even in many work situations. In Argentina, vos is used in almost all informal contexts, and usted is relatively rare.

How does English express the same social meaning? It uses other tools:

- **Names and titles:** Mr Smith / Professor Lee (formal) and John (informal).
- **Modal verbs and polite phrases:** Could you possibly…? / Would you mind…? instead of Can you…?
- **Vocabulary and tone:** formal words, longer sentences and softer intonation.
- **Terms of address:** sir, madam, mate, buddy, dear.

This means English also has politeness, but it is not inside the pronoun. For this reason, a Spanish speaker may need to learn that English "formality" is more about how we say something than about which pronoun we use.

6. Similarities

Although the systems are different, they have some important things in common:

1. **Direct address.** Both you and tú/usted refer to the person we are talking to.
2. **Generic use.** Both languages can use the second person to talk about people in general. English: You need a visa to enter that country. Spanish: Tú necesitas visa para entrar or, more often, Se necesita visa. In informal Spanish, tú can be used in the same way: Si no estudias, no aprendes.
3. **Historical development.** Both languages had a singular/plural system in the past (thou/ye and tú/vos), and both changed over time under the influence of politeness.
4. **Regional variation.** English has different plural forms (y'all, you guys, youse), and Spanish has different forms of vos and vosotros/ustedes. In both cases, geography is important.
5. **Social function.** Both languages express relationships between speakers, even if they do it in different ways.

7. Main differences: a summary

- **Number of forms:** English has one (you); Spanish has four or five (tú, vos, usted, ustedes, vosotros).
- **Number marking:** English shows singular and plural only in yourself/yourselves; Spanish shows it in the pronoun and the verb.
- **Formality:** English does not mark formality in the pronoun; Spanish does.
- **Verb agreement:** English you always takes a plural-type verb form; Spanish usted takes a third-person singular verb, tú and vos have their own forms.
- **Pronoun use:** English requires the pronoun; Spanish usually omits it.
- **Region:** English variation is small and informal; Spanish variation (tuteo, voseo, ustedeo, vosotros) is a normal part of the grammar.

8. Problems for learners and ideas for teaching

Learners of Spanish (including English speakers) often make these mistakes: using tú with people who need usted; mixing the tú verb form with the pronoun usted (*usted hablas); forgetting that ustedes is the plural for both formal and informal speech in Latin America; and being surprised by vos when they travel to Argentina or Central America.

Learners of English who speak Spanish often forget the subject pronoun, look for a formal you that does not exist, or are surprised by you guys and y'all.

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Some practical ideas for teachers:

• **Role-play with context cards.** Give students situations (a new boss, a grandmother, a classmate, a hotel receptionist) and ask them to choose the correct form or the correct level of politeness.

• **Regional maps.** Show a map of tuteo, voseo and vosotros/ustedes to explain that all these forms are "correct" in their own regions.

• **Error correction tasks.** Students find and correct sentences such as *Usted tienes un libro.

• **Transformation exercises.** Students change a short dialogue from informal to formal (tú → usted) and then from singular to plural (usted → ustedes), and notice how verbs, pronouns and possessives change.

• **Compare politeness strategies.** In an English class, practise Could you…?, Would you mind…? and titles, and compare them with Spanish usted.

Conclusion

The English pronoun you and the Spanish forms tú, vos, usted and ustedes have the same basic function: to address the listener. However, English is a system with one form, while Spanish is a system with several forms that carry information about number, politeness and region. English moved the expression of politeness out of the pronoun and into vocabulary, grammar structures and tone. Spanish kept it in the pronoun and the verb.

For learners, understanding these differences is not only a grammar exercise. It also helps them to understand culture and to communicate respectfully in real situations. For teachers, a comparative approach makes this topic clearer and more memorable.

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