Variability and identity: The use of pronouns of address by students of Spanish as a foreign language

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between L2 identity and pronouns of address variability by learners of Spanish as a foreign language in the United States. Two different classes on the East Coast were observed and recorded: a middle-school basic Spanish class and a university middle-advanced Spanish class; university students were also surveyed. The main objectives of this research were to describe the impact that level of proficiency in Spanish has on the use of pronouns of address by Spanish as a foreign language students and to explore the extent to which identity shapes the variability of pronouns of address in learners of Spanish as a foreign language. For the data analyses, chi-squared tests and Cramer's V measurement were run. The analysis shows that, when interacting, speakers have their own linguistic identity and *tú* is their main pronoun of address. This article concludes that there is no variability and the usage of pronouns of address by Spanish learners is stabilized, being *tú* is the mainly used pronoun. Also, students are mentally conscious of the contexts in which they are expected to use either *tú* or *usted*, but, in practice, they only use *tú*. Finally, identity and imagined communities might shape speakers' variability in terms of lexicography, but not morphologically with pronouns of address.

Keywords

variability; second language identity; Spanish as a foreign language; pronouns of address in Spanish; Spanish in the US

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Language is one of the most complex capacities of human beings (Pinker 1995; Sampson, Gil, and Trudgill 2009); it is dynamic and in constant change. Through language, neologisms, lexical chunks, and semantic meaning are created. Due to this, learning or developing a second language is a complex process (Al-Hoorie and Hiver 2020). One of the many variables that can influence the L2 development process is *identity.* Based on the way students perceive themselves when speaking an L2 or the community they want to belong in the future may influence their development and modify the linguistic variation they adopt as foreign speakers.

This paper aims to describe the way in which Spanish students use Pronouns of Address in Spanish and the extent in which their *identity* as FL speakers modifies the usage of these pronouns. This article is structured as follows. First, the concepts of *variability* and *identity in L2* are defined; and a summary of the complexity of the pronouns of address in Spanish is presented. The second part of this article presents the research methodology, the participants and the data analysis. Then, the results are presented and discussed. Finally, this paper presents the final conclusions and the limitations of this research.

Variability

When learning a new language, students often have the possibility of expressing an idea in different ways. This phenomenon is known as *variability* and refers to the fact that L2 learners commonly produce different versions of particular target language items within a short time span (Mitchell, Myles, and Marsden 2013). Following Ellis (2008), both learning and using a language is a dynamic process in which regularities and systems arise from the interaction of people, brains, individual selves, societies, and cultures using languages in the world. Regarding Second Language Acquisition—SLA, "research has increasingly taken this path while seeing variability in learner performance as offering significant insights into the SLA process" (Larsen-Freeman 2018, 60). In other words, studying the *variability* presented in second language learners' utterances helps the understanding of the language learning process.

When studying *variability*, there are three main approaches within the field of SLA: the linguistics approach, which follows the Chomskyan tradition; the sociolinguistic approach, and the psycholinguistic approach (Ellis 1994). The linguistic approach views variation "as a feature of performance rather than of the learner's underlying knowledge system" (Ellis 1994, 119). This is to say, the problem of variability is solved by establishing the difference between *competence* and *performance*. Thus, variability is ignored by this paradigm.

On the other hand, the sociolinguistic approach, which studies language in relation to social context, embraces *variability* from different perspectives. R. Ellis (1994) indexes the following: language varieties or dialects, differences of speech by social factors such as class or ethnicity, and variation of speech because of changes in situational context. Moreover, Verspoor et al. (2008, 215) mention that, based on the work of William Labov, the sociolinguistic approach has included different factors such as "interlocutor (first language [L1] or L2 speaker); situational context (formal, informal); task (speaking, writing); form–function relations (…); and the like to account for the variability observed".

Finally, the psycholinguistic approach seeks to "account for the variation that results from factors that influence the learner's ability to process L2 knowledge under different conditions of use" (Ellis 1994, 120). This approach analyzes L2 variability under different conditions such as if the utterance is planned or not. Furthermore, Verspoor et al. (2008) mention that both sociolinguistic and

psycholinguistic approaches attempt to discover the sources that were responsible for the variability and its relations with inter-language system.

There is, however, another approach that is also interested in analyzing variability in SLA: The Dynamic Systems Theory—DST. From a DST perspective, all development made by a language user is the sum of real-time actions, and, regarding variability, it is understood as the expression of the adaptability of the system by the L2 learner (Taguchi and Roever 2017; van Dijk, Verspoor, and Lowie 2011; Verspoor, Lowie, and van Dijk 2008). Following Verspoor et al. (2011, 4), "variability can actually be analyzed as data because the different patterns may give insight into the developmental process".

As noted above, analyzing and studying variability in L2 learners' utterances could help understand the second language learning process: "Individual variability is a central construct for studying language development" (Ortega 2011, 172). Just as language is not static, neither is people's experience with the language and identities they adopt, "along with commonalities in the learning process, there will also be variation" (Larsen-Freeman 2011, 56). Consequently, this variability is due to different factors and social contexts, such as where the learners lived and studied (Larsen-Freeman, 2011), or some other affective dimensions like temperament, emotions and preferences about how to process new information (Ortega, 2013).

To sum up, linguistic complexity and the possibility for students to choose among different words to express ideas produce *variability*. This *variability* is related to different factors such as the context, the place where the learning process is taking place, or the identity that students adopt when speaking a new language. Additionally, the environment in which the L2 is being learned has an important role when it comes to study variability since "learner and environment continuously influence and shape each other, which results in the observed variability" (Verspoor, De Bot, and Lowie 2011, 215). When learning an L2, variability offers the learner the possibility to explore and select, which helps them develop their language proficiency. The more different forms from which they can select, the more likely development is to take place (Verspoor, Lowie, and van Dijk 2008; Verspoor and Behrens 2011).

Identity in L2

When learning an L2, language and identity are hardly separable, since it is the way students perceive themselves (Csizér and Kormos 2009; Gao and Lamb 2011). According to Norton (2013, 45), identity references to "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future". From a sociolinguistic perspective, identity "can refer to an individual's own subjective sense of self, to personal classification 'markers' that appear as important, both to oneself and to others, and also to those markers that delineate group membership(s)" (Edwards 2009, 16).

Theories of the good language learner have been developed on the premise that language learners can choose under what conditions they will interact with members of the target language community and that the language learner's access to the target language community is a function of the learner's motivation (Norton 2013, 44). This idea of the target language community also works as a route for the future-self of L2 students. Following Ushioda (2011, 20), students are also enabled to engage directly with their future possible selves "as users of the target language, but within the scope and security of their current communicative abilities". In other words, when students think of the communities that they want to enter with the target language, they feel motivated and embrace a new identity.

Norton (2001) employs Anderson's (1991) construct of *imagined communities* to explain the way in which L2 learners construct their identity based on those communities that are not immediately accessible. Once learners have set their goals regarding these imagined communities, they need to get

access to materials and activities that fuel their imagination by presenting them with "potential imagined communities and possible models for their L2 selves" (Murray 2011, 85).

To sum up, this project conceives *identity* as the way students perceive themselves and the way they want to be seen by others when learning and using an L2. Moreover, this idea of *identity* is linked to the motivational factor of *imagined communities*, which can be defined as the ideal community students don't have immediate access to but want to belong in the future, which impacts their learning process and their identity as L2 speakers.

Pronouns of Address in Spanish

One of the most complex linguistic phenomenon in Spanish, from a sociolinguistic perspective, is the use of *pronouns of address*—PoA (Doyle D'Ambrosio 2004; Lara Bermejo 2018; Mas Álvarez 2014). These pronouns let the speaker choose which pronouns to use when talking to another person. Following Brown & Gilman (1970), the use of pronouns *tú* or *usted* (both *you* in Spanish) depends on factors such as power and solidarity. According to the authors, *tú* is used to express solidarity, trust or closeness between speakers. On the other hand, the use of *usted* denotes respect and difference of power.

This idea of the use of pronouns is also presented on different Spanish as a Foreign Language—SFL—textbooks. For instance, Andrade et al. (2019, 36), authors of *Tu mundo*, mention that "**Tú** is a familiar (informal) singular form of *you,* whereas **usted** is a polite (formal) singular form of *you*". Similarly, in *¡Nos vemos!*, Lloret Ivorra et al. (2011) mention that the pronoun *usted* is used in formal conversations. And Equipo Nuevo Prisma (2014, 15) mentions that the use of *tú* or *usted* depends on the context (formal/informal) "En español peninsular, *tú* y *vosotros/as* se usan para hablar con amigos y familia, es informal. *Usted* y *ustedes* se utilizan para hablar con personas mayores, desconocidas o en situaciones más formales[1]". Thus, it would be expected to use *tú* among friends and family members with whom the speakers have a sense of confidence and solidarity, and *usted* to address people with more or less power or confidence such as professors, doctors, elders, or strangers.

Nevertheless, sociolinguistic, intercultural and multilingual studies indicate that this rule on the use of pronouns is not always implemented. Doyle D'Ambrosio (2004) mentions that within Latin America, there is a big variation concerning PoA and argues that almost a third part of the Spanish speakers uses *vos* as a pronoun of address. In addition, Mas Álvarez (2014) indicates that the uses of pronouns of address in Spain and Latin America are different. And Lara Bermejo (2020) concludes that it is not only a geographical factor, but also that the problem itself relies on the scholars and linguists who don't agree on establishing the singular vs plural paradigm of PoA. In Colombia, for example, some scholars conclude that the use of *usted* among family members and close friends is something common (Colenso-Semple 2008; Uber 2011). Also, the use of *tú* is a sign of high class or homosexuality (Cepeda Ruiz 2014; Son Jang 2015; Zwisler 2017), and the use of *vos* is a mark of regional identity (Jang 2012; 2014).

To conclude, Spanish offers the possibility to choose among different pronouns to address another person (*tú, usted, vos, sumercé*). Textbooks and classic studies suggest that *usted* should be used to address strangers or people with whom a relation of power exists (formal situations), and *tú* should be used among friends and family members (informal situations). However, new approaches to this particularly indicate that the use of pronouns of address is more related to a personal choice or an identity mark and conclude that the classic rule of formal vs informal is not always true.

Having said this, the main objective of this research is to analyze to what extent the identity of SFL learners shapes their variability of pronouns of address.

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1   In peninsular Spanish, *tú* and *vosotros/as* are used to address friends and relatives, it is informal. *Usted* and *ustedes* are used to address elders, strangers, or in more formal situations.

As previously discussed, *variability* offers students the possibility to choose among different words to express their thoughts. This possibility is linked to different factors, *identity* being one of them. This means that, based on the way students perceived themselves or, according to the *imagined communities* they want to belong when using Spanish, they could change the words they use to talk. Finally, the usage of *pronouns of address* in different Spanish speaking countries varies depending on different variables such as class level, sexual orientation, and identity. Based on this, the following research questions are proposed:

i   How does level of proficiency in Spanish impact the use of pronouns of address by Spanish as a Foreign Language students?

ii   To what extent does identity shape the variability of pronouns of address in learners of Spanish as a Foreign Language?

And the following hypotheses are considered:

1   Due to their level, Basic Spanish students will follow the formal/informal notion of pronouns, using *tú* to address classmates and *usted* to address their teacher.

2   Once students have developed a higher Spanish level, their usage of pronouns would vary depending on their *identity* as L2 speakers.

Participants

The main objective of this project is to describe the extent in which *identity* shape the *variability* of *pronouns of address* in learners of Spanish as a Foreign Language. To reach this objective, two different Spanish groups were observed and recorded. One group was a middle school intermediate level, and the other was an advanced college level (N=36), both located on the East Coast of the United States.

One the one hand, the middle school was a suburban, middle-income middle school. The class observed was an eight-grade Spanish class taught by a 23-year-old female, advanced pre-service teacher intern; non-native speaker, whose proficiency was rated as "Advanced-Low" in an official ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (roughly equivalent to "C1" rating on CEFR scale). There were 18 students aged between 14 and 17 from a largely middle class European-American suburban community (n=18).

On the other hand, the university was a public university on the East Coast of the United States. The class was a conversation class required to get the Major in Spanish and was taught by a native speaker professor from Argentina with an extended teaching experience. There were 18 students aged between 18 and 23 from different ethnicities, nationalities, and social classes (n=18).

RESULTS

As mentioned before, both groups were observed and recorded. To analyze the data gathered and the use of *pronouns of address*, this project will follow a variationist sociolinguistic approach (Silva Corvalán 2001) in which tokens will be counted and documented. According to Labov (1972), the purpose of a sociolinguistic study in a community is to discover the way in which people talk when participants are not being systematically observed, however, this information can only be gotten through systematical observation. This problem is known as the *Observer's paradox.* To diminish the effects of this paradox, before the classes were observed, there was a socialization and different ice breakers that help the students feel comfortable with a new member in the class.

Once the classes were recorded, some students from the university class were chosen and accepted to be part of a survey, in which participants were asked about their life and experience in the community. In this particular context, the survey was focused on the participant's life as a Spanish learner, his/her reasons and motivations to major in Spanish and his/her goals regarding the use of Spanish in the future; this last part of the survey was intended to analyze the imagined communities (Duff 2007; Swain and Deters 2007) to which they want to belong.

For each class 50 tokens were collected and only the pronouns *tú, usted* and *vos* (all *you* in English) were considered. The following chart represents the tokens and the different pronouns.

Table 1. Analyzed tokens

Institution	*tú*	*usted*	*vos*	Total
Middle School	50 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	50 (100%)
University	49 (98%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	50 (100%)

For the data analysis, contingency tables were created, and chi-squared tests were run.

This research aimed to answer the following research questions: how does the level of proficiency in Spanish impact the use of pronouns of address by Spanish as a Foreign Language students and to what extend does *identity* shape the *variability* of *pronouns of address* in learners of Spanish as a Foreign Language? This section presents the results obtained after observing two different Spanish classes in the US, one middle-school low level class and one university advanced level class.

According to the data above, out of the three main pronouns available in Spanish to address a second singular person (*tú, usted, vos*), students that were observed during this research only use two of them: *tú* and *vos; tú being* the main pronoun used by the students, with a 100% used in the middle school classroom and a 98% used in college. There was only one token with the pronoun *vos* (2%) by one of the students.

To answer the first RQ, a chi-squared was run. The counts and expected counts for each pronoun are given in the following contingency table:

Table 2. Contingency Table

Level		Pronoun *tú*	*vos*	Total
	Count	50.000	0.000	50.000
School	Expected count	49.500	0.500	50.000
	% within row	100.000 %	0.000	100.000 %
	Count	49.000	1.000	50.000
College	Expected count	49.500	0.500	50.000
	% within row	98.000 %	2.000	100.000 %
	Count	99.000	1.000	100.000
Total	Expected count	99.000	1.000	100.000
	% within row	99.000 %	1.000	100.000 %

Table 3. Chi-Squared Tests

	Value	df	p
χ^2	1.010	1	0.315
N	100		

The Chi-squared test and the Cramer's V measurement revealed that there is no statistically significant relationship between the level of proficiency and the use of PoA by Spanish students ($\chi2$ (1, N = 100) = 1.010, p = 0.315, φc =0.101). Both groups tend to use the pronoun *tú.* This rejects the first hypothesis: Basic Spanish students do not follow the formal/informal notion of pronouns, all participants use *tú* to address classmates and their teacher. Same with advanced students.

Results for Middle School participants

The class in the middle school was taught in person before COVID-19. There were 18 students in total plus the teacher and the observer (Professor Paul D. Toth). All names were modified to keep anonymous identities. The class' objective was to explore different uses of the *Se Impersonal* in Spanish by reading and comparing restaurants' reviews and writing and reading stories.
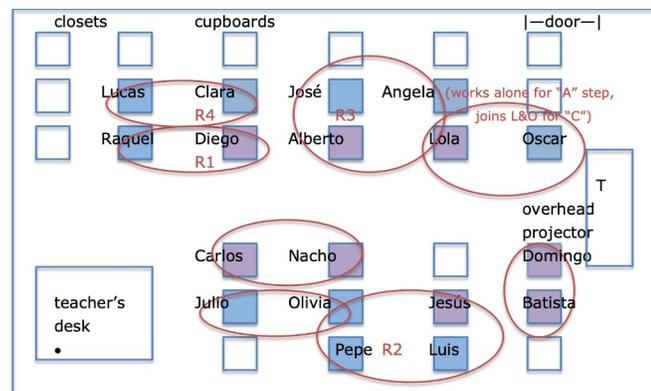
Figure 1. Classroom distribution

During the class, a total of 50 tokens were counted, all of them with the pronoun *tú.* It is important to notice that, in Spanish, the verb forms often make subject pronouns unnecessary, so even if the pronoun was not used, all verbs conjugated with one of the second person singular pronouns were counted.

Tienes que escuchar.
'You [tú] have to listen.'

¿Qué tienes?
'What do you [*tú*] have?'

¿No sabes?
'Don't you [*tú*] know?'

¿ Tienes otro cuento?
'Do you [*tú*] have another story?'

Te toca.
'It's your [*tú*] turn.'

Hola, Lucas, ¿Qué tú piensas?
'Hi, Lucas, what do you think?'

It is also important to notice that most of the times, conversation among students was carried in English while the teacher asked them in Spanish, using the *tú* pronoun as well:

Teacher: *Ya tienen un cuento?*
'Do you guys have a story yet?'
Clara: *My group is very un-on-task.*
Teacher: *Okay, bueno, can I-, ¿puedo escuchar, **puedes** compartir un cuento por favor?*
'Ok, well, can I-, Can I hear, can you [tú] share a story please?'
José: *She lost her dog.*
Clara: *I did. I already read mine.*
Teacher: *I, okay, pero yo quiero escucharlo. Y porque tenemos tanto tiempo, que…*
'I, Ok, but I want to hear it. And because we have so much time that…'
Clara: *Okay.*
Teacher: ***Tú puedes** leer **tu** cuento.*
'You can read your story.'
Clara: *Okay.*
Teacher: *Un montón de veces.*
'Lots of times.'

When doing in-group activities, students also use the pronoun *tú.* The following transcript shows the way in which students address each other using the expression *te toca*, an informal chunk in Spanish used to express a chance or obligation to do something. This expression can be also used with the pronoun *usted* by changing the indirect object pronoun *te* by *le*: "*le toca*".

Clara: *Okay, José's turn. **Te** toca.*
'Ok, Jose's turn. It's your turn.'
José: *¿Me toca?*
'It's my turn?'
Clara: *Sí, **te** toca.*
'Yes, it's your turn.'
José: *Ah-'ight.*

The following chart sums the use of PoA by students in the middle school class observed in this research.

Table 4. Pronouns used by middle school participants

tú	*usted*	*vos*	Total
50 tokens (100%)	0 tokens (0%)	0 tokens (0%)	50 tokens (100%)

This data provides a global perspective of how the pronoun *tú* is used in Spanish class by beginners among themselves and to address their teacher.

Results for University participants

This was a virtual class taught through Zoom due to COVID-19. It was a conversation class, part of the major degree in Spanish by one public university on the East Coast. The class was taught by an Argentinian professor and there were 18 students; all of them American whose first language was English. Students were asked to complete a survey about their use of PoA after the class.

The class topic for discussion was the Spanish Civil War and it focused on the grammatical difference between *Ser Confuso* [to be confusing] and *Estar Confundido* [to be confused]. The entire class was taught in Spanish, except by some minimal moments in which some students did not find the appropriate way to express their ideas and explained their thoughts in English.

During the first part of the class, the professor introduced the researcher and told students he was observing his class for academic purposes. Then, the professor asked students to ask questions to the researcher to practise and know more about his life and work. This was intended to analyze the way in which students would address a new person whose first language was Spanish. Again, all names were changed to keep anonymity. The researcher will be named Juan. These are some excerpts from the students questioning the researcher transcripts.

Professor:	*Maira, **te** veo a **ti** primero. **Piensa** una pregunta que le **puedas** hacer a Juan.* 'Maira, I see you first. Think [tú] about a question you [tú] can ask Juan.'
Maira:	*Um, ¿qué **estás** estudiando en **tu** programa graduado?* 'What are you [tú] studying in your graduate program?'
Wilson:	*¿Qué **quieres** hacer para el trabajo? ¿**Quieres**, um, hacer investigación o enseñar español?* 'What do you [tú] want to do for a living? Do you [tú] want to, uhm, do research or teach Spanish?'
Carlos:	*¿Es el español **tu** lengua materna?* 'Is Spanish your native language?'
Camila:	*¿Cuántas lenguas **hablas**?* 'How many languages do you [tú] speak?'
Professor:	*Tom, a **ti** que **te** gusta el fútbol, **hazle** una pregunta a Juan.* 'Tom, you like soccer, ask [tú] Juan a question.'
Tom:	[unintelligible]
Professor:	*Bueno, pero **hazle** una pregunta sobre fútbol a Juan.* 'Ok, but ask [tú] Juan something about soccer.'
Tom:	*Ah, ¿cuál es **tu** equipo favorito de fútbol?* 'Ah, what is your favorite soccer team?'

So far, all utterances present usage of the pronoun *tú*. However, as the following transcript shows, there was one token in which the pronoun *vos* was used. This utterance, although presented here, will be discussed below.

Professor:	*Sabemos que Juan es colombiano. ¿Quién estudia Colombia este semestre? Wilson, ¿**tú** estudias Colombia?* 'We know Juan is Colombian. Who studies Colombia this semester? Wilson, do you study Colombia?'
Wilson:	*Yo, sí.* Yes, I do.

Professor:	*A ver, ¿por qué no le **haces** otra pregunta sobre Colombia, Wilson? Porque **tu** país es Colombia.*
	'Let's see, why don't you [tú] ask him another question about Colombia, Wilson? Since your country is Colombia.'
Wilson:	*Eh, ¿de cuál parte de Colombia **sos**?*
	'Eh, what part of Colombia are you [vos] from?'

The main topic of this class conversation was the Spanish Civil war. After watching some videos about art and drawings by children during the war, students had to come up with two questions. One question would be something they would ask a child who lived in Spain during those days and the other question would be to an adult. Again, this activity was planned to analyze the way in which students would address an unknown Spanish child and an unknown Spanish adult from the civil war time.

These are some of the questions that students would ask a kid:

Tom:	*¿Por qué **piensas** que los dos lados no se llevan bien?*
	'Why do you [tú] think both sides do not get along well?'
Camila:	*¿**Tienes** miedo?*
	'Are you [tú] scared?'
Álvaro:	*¿Qué **has** oído sobre la guerra de sus padres?*
	'What have you [tú] heard about war from your parents?'
Kristen:	*¿**Has** visto un avión antes de la guerra?*
	'Have [tú] you seen an airplane before war?'

Regarding the questions that students would ask an adult, these are some examples:

Reina:	*¿Qué **quieres** que **tu** hijo sepa sobre la guerra? Y también, ¿qué **quieres** censurar sobre la guerra?*
	'What do you [tú] want your son to know about war? And also, what do you want to ban from war?'
Josefa:	*¿Por qué razón **crees** que el otro lado está peleando?*
	'For what reason do you [tú] think the other side is fighting?'

This activity and the questions the students brought up show a high usage of the pronoun *tú* to address both young and old interlocutors. The following chart summarizes the use of PoA during this class.

Table 5. Pronouns used by university participants

tú	*usted*	*vos*	Total
49 tokens (98%)	0 tokens (0%)	1 token (2%)	50 tokens (100%)

Identity and motivations

Once the class was over, students were asked to complete a survey about their motivations to learn Spanish and the way they perceive themselves in the future using their Spanish, this aimed to get

information regarding their perceptions about Spanish, their identities, and their *imagined communities*.

About their motivation to learn Spanish, students mention that the three main aspects to learn Spanish are the possibility to move abroad (22.3%), learn about new cultures (33.3%) and the raise of Hispanic population in the US (44.4%).

When asked about the context in which they see themselves using Spanish in the future (*imagined communities*), 33.3% of the students see themselves working in the US with Hispanic communities; 26.6% said they see themselves living in a Spanish speaking country; 26.6% of the students see themselves exploring and touring Latin America but not living there; and finally, 13.3% of the students see themselves as future Spanish teachers.

Regarding the Spanish variation they want to adopt, most students admitted not having interest in any variation, while only three students mentioned Mexican Spanish as their ideal variation. In terms of *Community of Practice* (CoP), beside their current classmates and professors at college, students practise their Spanish with friends from the Caribbean (43%), Mexico (28.5%), and with friends who are also learning Spanish (28.5%).

Since this research aimed to analyze the way in which identity shapes the use of pronouns of address, students were asked about their usage of these pronouns and the contexts in which they consider they use them. When asked about which pronoun they mostly use, 100% of the students said *tú* (informal *you*). Nevertheless, there were comments such as "It's hard to say. When I'm medical interpreting I only use *Usted*, but when I'm tutoring or talking with friends, I will use *tú*. I only use *vos* when I'm unsure of which to use". This answer was provided by one of the students who currently works as a medical interpreter. The answer reflects a basic notion of the contexts in which these pronouns should be used following the formal/informal dichotomy.

Similarly, when asked about the pronoun they use to address their Spanish professor, 57.2% mentioned *usted* (formal *you*) and 42.8% mentioned *tú* (informal *you*). Again, this answer lets us observe that the use of these pronouns is based on a notion of power and respect. However, as observed in the transcriptions, when addressing the professor, all students used *tú* (informal *you*).

On the other hand, when asked about which pronoun they use to address classmates, all students said *tú*; this is reflected in the transcripts. And when asked about the pronoun they use when meeting a new Spanish speaking person, 57.1% said *usted;* 28.6% said *tú;* and 14.3% said *vos.*

Finally, students were asked about the contexts in which they use these pronouns. When asked about when they use *tú,* these were some of the answers:
- Informal/conversational.
- Primarily informal or with people that I am familiar with.
- Informal contexts.
- With friends or with my students.
- When I am talking to anyone who isn't an authority figure, such as friends, family, classmates, and most other people I've met more than once.
- When I am talking to a peer or my professor.
  When asked about when they use *usted,* these were some of the answers:
- Professional settings or with an elder.
- With people I do not know very well.
- Formal contexts.
- While medical interpreting or talking to my professors.
- Only for someone such as a professor, boss, or someone I'm meeting for the very first time.
- When I am talking to a group of people or a new person.
- When the person seems intimidating or fancy.

Regarding when they use *vos,* most students agreed that they never use this pronoun; however, these are the answers provided by those who use the pronoun:

- Only in academics.
- When I have just met someone older than me and I'm not sure if using *tú* would be rude.
- Only to practice the conjugation.

DISCUSSION

The data gathered and analyzed during this research provide an insight into the way in which Spanish as a foreign language learners' identity shapes their variability of pronouns of address. As already mentioned, a basic notion of the usage of these pronouns follows the formal/informal dichotomy, being *tú* used in informal contexts and *usted* in formal contexts.

The tokens counted in the middle school class' transcript show that in terms of PoA, there is no variability. All participants in this basic Spanish class use the pronoun *tú* to communicate with their classmates and to address their teacher, who also uses *tú* as her main pronoun to address her students. The use of this pronoun can also be seen in periphrastic constructions. Moreover, the results of the Chi-squared test revealed that there is no significant relationship between the level of proficiency and the use of PoA. Hence, hypothesis 1 (due to their level, Basic Spanish students will follow the formal/informal notion of pronouns, using *tú* to address classmates and *usted* to address their teacher) is rejected.

One can argue that, on account of their current language level, identity does not influence variability. However, the transcripts show that even the teacher, whose Spanish proficiency level is Advanced-Low (near C1 on the CEFRL), does not present any variability when addressing her students either, thus, regarding PoA, proficiency level in L2 would not be a variable when studying variability. It can be said, however, that SFL speakers have their own linguistic identity and use *tú* as their main pronoun of address.

The results for the advanced class in college are like the ones found in the middle school. The second hypothesis suggested that once students have developed a higher Spanish level, they would present a broader variability in the usage of pronouns based on their L2 identity. This idea was also rejected. On the one hand, as data showed, 98% of the tokens counted during the class were with the pronoun *tú*. Variability, at least in terms of PoA, does not depend on linguistic proficiency.

On the other hand, when asked about motivations and identity as L2 speakers, students admit seeing themselves in an imagined community living abroad in Spanish speaking countries or working with specific Latino communities. These ideas, however, do not modify their usage of PoA either. Finally, when asked about the contexts in which they use the pronouns *tú*, *usted* and *vos*, students seemed to know the formal/informal dialectic, since they argued that they use *tú* among close friends and *usted* to talk to elders, professors, or people they just met; nevertheless, the transcripts show a different reality. Students use *tú* when addressing their professor, a person they just met (the researcher), or elders (the adults from the Spanish Civil War). Same as with the middle school analysis, it can be said that, even though students know that the use of PoA is based on the formality of the contexts and specific pronouns should be used to address certain people, when interacting, SFL speakers have their own linguistic identity and *tú* is their main pronoun of address.

CONCLUSION

This research reflects that in terms of PoA by SFL speakers, *variability* is low. Following Verspoor & Behrens (2011), if the variability is low, it can be said that the system has stabilized for a particular period and for a particular aspect, whereas if the variability is high, the system is changing and moving towards another state or stage in the development until the system has settled again (Verspoor and Behrens 2011, 36). Based on this, this paper concludes the following:

- The usage of PoA by SFL speakers is stabilized and *tú* is the mainly used pronoun.
- Although students are mentally conscious of the contexts in which they are expected to use either *tú* or *usted*, when in practice, the formal/informal concept is not followed, and they only use *tú*.
- Identity and imagined communities might shape the speakers' variability in terms of lexicography, but not morphologically with pronouns of address.

In terms of limitations, only two levels of Spanish classes were observed: low and middle advanced. Also, this study took place on the middle East Coast of the United States. A study of PoA by SFL speakers in different areas of the country is encouraged.

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