

SOCIOCOMMUNICATIVE STYLE AND ITS COGNITIVE PROPERTIES: VARIABLE EXPRESSION
AND PLACEMENT OF THE SPANISH SUBJECT (*USTED / USTEDES*)

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1. Introduction: variation, cognition and style

Inquiries on linguistic variation tend to confine themselves to formal description and statistical correlation, viewing speakers' choices from a behaviorist perspective that ties them to preexisting environmental conditions and/or to certain aspects of social affiliation. A remarkably different approach involves taking into account the mental perceptions underlying linguistic form and analyzing variants as resources used to construct and communicate particular conceptions of reality in interaction. In fact, even the typical patterning of variants across social groups, genres and situations might be a large-scale effect of the existence of different contextual styles embodying meanings of various kinds (e. g. discursive, pragmatic, social or interactional). In order to ascertain facts like this, a combination of quantitative methods with qualitative insight, ultimately supported by internal cognitive explanations, is needed.

The present work will show some preliminary results of a research project aimed to develop a new theoretical and methodological frame for the study of syntactic variation in Spanish.¹ Our approach intends to integrate some of the most recent advances in cognitive linguistic theory and put them forward as explanatory for the very existence of sociolinguistic variation at both macro- and microanalytic levels (*cf.* Serrano & Aijón Oliva forthcoming a).² We start from a broad notion of linguistic variable as any communicative possibility reflecting as well as shaping a diffuse and ever-changing perception of reality (Aijón Oliva & Serrano 2010), so grammatical variants are viewed as meaningful choices that contribute to the unfolding of communicative styles in interaction. The self-

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² Substantial differences can be pointed out between this type of research and that of purely cognitive sociolinguistics. The hermeneutic process followed by the latter starts from notional or conceptual cognitive categories and observes their social arrangement, whereas the former aims to validate empirically observed syntactic and sociostylistic variation by taking cognitive grammar as its explanatory basis (*cf.* Serrano 2010b).

imposed restrictions of traditional research methods for phonological variables, as well as the difficulties for their implementation at higher analytical levels, can thus be overcome (*cf.* Serrano 2010a, Serrano 2010b).

One of the variable syntactic phenomena we focus on is expression / omission of the clause subject and its preverbal / postverbal placement when expressed. Results of previous research indicate that, following general tendencies of grammar and cognition, subjects not explicitly formulated usually enjoy higher degrees of salience and activation in the cognitive context shared by speakers: in most cases they have been previously mentioned or are easily identifiable through verbal morphology. In the event of expression, subjects which appear postposed to the verb –therefore displaced from what constitutes their unmarked position in most languages– will be perceptually assimilated to syntactic objects and thus bear a lesser degree of salience as against preverbal subjects.³ Interestingly enough, such perceptual values of syntactic variants have been found to be projectable on the domain of interaction, which includes the possibility of deploying them as resources of linguistic (im)politeness (*cf.* Serrano & Aijón Oliva, forthcoming b).

Other remarkable facts have been uncovered with regard to expression and omission of the subject pronoun in the construction (*yo*) *creo* ‘I think’, this being frequently used in mass media texts (Aijón Oliva & Serrano, forthcoming a). Express *yo* was most often found when introducing argumentative and personal contents, while its elision proved typically associated to epistemic communicative purposes and (allegedly) objective utterances. Such correlations seem to be in direct correspondence to the perceptual nature of clause subjects. Expression helps construct a style based on subjectivity and suitable for, say, politicians in order to pragmatically reinforce their utterances, whereas omission favors a more impartial, objective image of speakers and discourse which may be prized by professional groups such as journalists. Social variation between men and women was detected as for the overall frequencies of *creo*, which might signal different tendencies in the epistemic orientation of discourse according to gender.

Findings like these can contribute to the development of an innovative view of syntactic variation as the main formal manifestation of linguistic style. This in turn should be understood as a creative process by which meanings are generated and communicated in interaction, a view which is in accordance with most modern stylistic theories (*cf.* Coupland 2007, Bell 2001, Auer ed. 2007, Schilling-Estes 2004, Cheshire 1987, 2005). Moving forward along this line, in the present work we will analyze variation in the expression of the second-person subject pronoun *usted* and its plural *ustedes*, with the goal of elucidating some of the cognitive meanings that make it qualify as a resource of communicative style.

³ However, this may depend on specific features of the interaction, such as the communicative purpose of the speaker or the conversational topic.

2. Variation in the use of *usted* / *ustedes*: a brief state of the art

Spanish grammars have hardly analyzed syntactic variation of these forms in any depth, at best citing the general focalizing function of express subjects as well as their supposed pleonastic nature (Gili Gaya 1972, Alarcos 1994:74). Some authors perceive a special tendency of *usted* and *ustedes* as against other pronouns to appear express and in a postverbal position (*Saben ustedes* 'You (pl.) know') (Fernández Ramírez 1987:72-73, Sánchez López 1993). The need for *usted* / *ustedes* to combine with third-person verbal inflections (*Usted sabe, ustedes saben*)⁴ has led others to conclude that it is the most frequently expressed subject pronoun in Peninsular Spanish, mainly for the sake of unambiguity (Keniston 1937:150, Rosengren 1974:25); however, this does not seem to be the case with American varieties (Kany 1969:123).

Luján (1999:1277) argues that expression vs. omission of the clause subject (*Tú trabajas demasiado* / \perp *trabajas demasiado* 'You work too hard') is a formal alternance with no noticeable consequences as for propositional meaning, while at the same time she admits that the variants are hardly equivalent at the pragmatic informational level. It has often been claimed that omission is more frequent when the subject constitutes given information or is easily recuperable from the context (Martín Rojo & Meeuwis 1993:88). Similarly, the most recent grammar by the Spanish Academies (NGRAE 2009: §33.5) sees the pragmatic factor of *contrastivity* as the main reason for the expression of subject pronouns, even when there is no explicit opposition between referents but it might be raised as such.

Variable subject expression has also been studied from a variationist perspective complemented by discursive-pragmatic notions (*cf.* Bentivoglio 1987, Silva Corvalán 2001, 2003, Serrano 2006:61-70), but the use of specific forms such as *usted* / *ustedes* has seldom been a primary interest from this viewpoint, let alone from a sociocognitive one such as we propose here. Variationist studies have often concluded that syntactic phenomena like this are mostly unrelated to social and stylistic variation. Quite to the opposite, we will hold that the use of these pronouns, besides being socially and situationally patterned, goes beyond syntax and discourse to acquire meanings related to interpersonal address and social politeness. In fact, social values have long been a concern for descriptive studies on the choice between so-called 'formal' *usted* and 'informal' *tú* second-person forms. We also believe such values may be explained with reference to degrees of cognitive salience and perceptual presence in the communicative scene. The omnipresence of notional factors in sociolinguistic variation emphasizes the iconic, symbolic and gradual nature of grammar (*cf.* Langacker 1987, 1991, Croft & Cruse

⁴ This is because *usted* evolved from the honorific nominal phrase *vuestra merced* 'your mercy', which employed third-person verbal morphology.

2008). The act of speaking entails not only choosing the form of the message, but also its content, so when some linguistic structure is formulated, a particular cognitive orientation of the utterance is selected at the same time.

3. Methodology and corpus

We have surveyed the texts of the Spanish *Corpus Conversacional del Español de Canarias* (CCEC)⁵. *Usted* and *ustedes* are found to be very frequent in mass media texts, most notably in those with a high degree of interaction among the participants as well as those serving a primarily argumentative function. There is an increase in their use whenever the second person is resorted to, e. g. when arranging inquiries or personal statements in the course of interaction. However, as already mentioned, *usted* / *ustedes* are not the only pronouns used to address interlocutors in Spanish. They are generally considered to be ‘respectful’ forms conveying a general and abstract idea of ‘distance’, in contrast with the more ‘intimate’ *tú* / *vosotros*.⁶ These notions should be taken into account in any study on pronouns and politeness, even if they do not constitute the main scope of the present research. In fact, most studies have focused on the contrast between both sets of forms, seeing them as a sort of morphological variants in complementary distribution which do not cause any changes in descriptive meaning. However, they are evidently different from canonical variants in that they can hardly alternate within a text addressed to a given person or group of people.

Here, instead of posing an opposition between different sets of pronouns, we will analyze the actualization of the inherent grammatical meaning of *usted* / *ustedes* as a case of cognitively-founded socio-situational variation. The focus on these forms in absolute rather than relative terms implies for them not to be viewed as contrasting with any others, but as generating meanings by themselves in the contexts where they are used.

As a starting point, we present the general percentages of both omission / expression of the pronoun (combining singular and plural cases) and its preverbal / postverbal placement in the corpus. Due to limitations of space, in the remainder of this work we will focus solely on the former phenomenon.

⁵ The corpus consists of a set of conversational texts by Canary Islands speakers, recorded both in face-to-face spontaneous conversations and in TV talk programs. For the present preliminary study, only the second type of texts has been taken into account, amounting to nearly 150,000 words.

⁶ In Canarian varieties, as well as throughout Latin America, the distinction applies only to the singular, *ustedes* being the universal plural form.

<i>Usted / ustedes</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>
Omission	254	37.2
Expression	429	62.8
<i>Total</i>	683	100

Table 1. Omission and expression of *usted / ustedes*

<i>Usted / ustedes</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>
Preposed	255	59.4
Postposed	174	40.6
<i>Total</i>	429	100

Table 2. Preverbal / postverbal placement of *express* *usted / ustedes*

4. Variable expression of *usted / ustedes*: internal meanings and interactional manifestations

We have stated that variation between expression and omission is related to the discursive-cognitive property of salience: an expressed pronoun should index a perceptually more relevant entity. In our view, the concept of salience may be understood in two different, gradual and partly opposite ways: *thematicity* and *informativity*. The first one involves the activation of a pronoun's referent in the notional context shared by the participants: it is generally a high degree of thematicity and textual continuity that makes it possible for a subject to be elided in discourse. On the contrary, expression is often due to the necessity of clarifying a new or unexpected referent in contrast with other possible ones; it will thus be informationally salient even if scarcely activated.⁷

The considerable omission rate of *usted / ustedes* (37.2%) does not support the idea of this pronoun being the most frequently expressed one, even if we assume that the figures may be partly dependent on the nature of the texts handled and their interactional characteristics. We find that omission is generally related to more thematic subjects and helps move the informational or contrastive

⁷ Such a distinction between two facets of *salience* may help explain some seemingly contradictory facts. Omission is not only typical of highly thematical subjects, but also of unspecific, unknown and discursively irrelevant ones (⊥ *Me han dicho que te mudas* '[Someone] told me you're moving'), not to mention the fact that properly impersonal sentences cannot even have a subject (though, interestingly, formal approaches have often assumed its underlying existence). This can only be explained by incorporating pragmatic informational notions to the theory.

focus away from the interlocutor.⁸ It is typical of situations where there is no competition between the participants as to becoming the protagonist of discourse. Also, in many cases it seems unnecessary to repeat a pronoun that has been previously formulated.

- (1) No se sorprenda usted si una cámara se le acerca||| en este momento porque le vamos a pedir a usted\que *usted* nos estampe su firma\que nos deje ⊥ un autógrafo\si es ⊥ tan amable\y enseguida le explico para qué\con la firma del alcalde\ vamos a estudiar lo que es el alcalde por dentro\ <Ma10E1Env>
 ‘... We are going to ask you for *you* to sign here, for [*you*] to give us your autograph, if [*you*] would be so kind. I’ll explain you why right away: through the mayor’s signature we are going to analyze the mayor from inside’

With its defocusing of the subject, omission tends to downplay the involvement of its referent in the event described; somehow it avoids the framing of the utterance in a personal sphere. For that reason, this variant often seems to invest propositional contents with a more general and objective status.⁹ In particular, when the interlocutor is unspecific, such as the audience of TV programs, omission provides a sense of objectivity which seems suitable for functions such as that of giving advice. In the following excerpt, a TV broadcaster addresses his audience.

- (2) Quiero decirles que ya el TDT de San Roque en La Laguna está operativo\en el área metropolitana\yo les recomiendo\que se vayan ⊥ olvidando de la televisión analógica\y para que nos ⊥ puedan ver\gracias a Retevisión\vayan ⊥ sintonizándonos en TDT\en toda el área metropolitana\y en el sur nos pueden ver\pero en el 90% de la isla no van a poder ver sin TDT\tienen repetidores en Izaña\en Los Campitos\y en La Corona de San Roque\y esto no tiene nada que ver con la Unelco\pásense ⊥ a la TDT\les recomiendo que cuanto más pronto mejor\ <Ma10Scan>
 ‘I suggest [*you*] forget about analog TV. For [*you*] to be able to keep watching us, thanks to Retevisión, [*you*]’d better start tuning in to us on DTV... [*You*] change to DTV, the sooner the better.’

Examples like the following also support the idea that omitted subjects are more frequent when the speaker intends to present the information as obvious or generally accepted. In (4), this seems to be supporting a polite movement at the

⁸ In fact, an omitted subject in Spanish can never be interpreted as contrastive nor focalized (NGRAE 2009: §33.5a, b).

⁹ This is extensively documented in our study on the construction (*Yo*) *creo* ‘I think’ (Aijón Oliva and Serrano, forthcoming a). General hypotheses tend to prefer omission of the first-person subject, whereas expression is overwhelmingly more frequent in contexts of subjective argumentation.

same time, a matter that shall be discussed later.

- (3) Pues como ven ⊥ \aquí es todo fiesta \disfrute y alegría \contentos de tener aquí en La Palma a Rosana la campeona del mundo de taekwondo <Ma10CanDi>
'As [*you*] can see, it's all fun and joy in here...'
- (4) Y *ustedes* ahora están trabajando \porque lo suelen hacer \con las últimas tecnologías \intentan ⊥ afrontar este tipo de problemas \y tienen ⊥ el láser verde \para los problemas de próstata \¿está dando buenos resultados? / <Ma10LaAlp>
'So now, as usual, *you* are working with the newest technologies. This is the way [*you*] try to fight such problems; [*you*] have the green laser to treat prostate diseases...'

Even more significant is the fact that the high thematicity and low informativity borne by elided subjects may be iconically transferred to the domain of interaction and the management of personal relationships through discourse. Omission proves a useful resource when the speaker does not want to put the focus on his/her interlocutor, e. g. when controversial or troublesome facts are discussed. In the following interview with the mother of a missing child, *usted* as a subject is omitted in all cases but one (the scarcely risky question *¿Usted les llama?*). A higher rate of expression might increase the salience of the interlocutor and thus emphasize her pain and sorrow.

- (5) A. ¿⊥ Sabe algo nuevo? / ¿la policía tiene contacto con usted? / (...)
A. Pero ⊥ no está sola / ¿verdad Nieves? (...) ¿Eso le ayuda? ¿Ahora mismo cuál es la comunicación que ⊥ mantiene con la familia? ¿*Usted* les llama? /
B. Bueno / sí / ellos me llaman / yo los llamo
A: ¿⊥ Había escrito algo antes en internet? / (...)
A. Déjeme ⊥ preguntarle por su otra hija \porque ya han pasado dos años y medio \porque sus vidas ha ido cambiando \¿verdad? \y las esperanzas van cambiando \ <Ma10RoyCo>
'Do [*you*] have any news? ... But [*you*] are not alone, right, Nieves? ... To what extent do [*you*] keep in touch with your family? Do *you* call them? ... Had [*you*] ever posted anything on the Internet before? ... [*You*] let me ask you about your other daughter...'

Other texts provide similar examples of *usted* being omitted in order to blur the implication of its referent in the event, while conveying a more objective, even solemn tone. Interviews with a predominance of omitted subjects do suggest a more objective vision of facts and discourse, probably because these are perceived as somewhat independent from the participants.

- (6) B. Como se puede imaginar\masticando\intentando digerir el problema\que estamos pasando\porque no es agradable para nadie que le llamen el día que su hijo ha muerto||y tan lejos\y tan joven\
 A.¿Cómo ⊥ se enteraron?/ (...)
 A. ¿Cómo era\señora\su hijo\para que toda España pueda conocerle?\¿Qué es lo que le han contado\desde allí\desde Afganistán?/
 B. Estoy haciendo un esfuerzo para hablar con ustedes\porque no tengo ganas de hablar con nadie\le puedo decir\que mi hijo era soldado de vocación\ (...)
 A. ¿Sabe ⊥ cuándo va a ser el funeral?\¿Le ha llamado el presidente Zapatero? porque además nos comentaba *usted* que su hijo ni siquiera era consciente del peligro que corría\ (...)
 <Ma10Re>
 ‘How did [*you*] learn [that your son was dead]? ... Do [*you*] know when the funeral will be held? ... Also, *you* just remarked that your son was unaware of the risk he was running...’

We conclude that subject omission and the high thematicity it implies are expectable when the speaker intends to protect the image of his/her interlocutor as a resource of politeness.¹⁰ However, since as we have seen omission generally prompts a more objective interpretation of utterances, it may sometimes be used as a subtle strategy to reinforce pejorative movements as well.

- (7) Me gustaría que\por una vez en su vida\⊥ respete y valore el trabajo\⊥ lo valore y ⊥ lo respete\ <Ma10EiEnv>
 ‘For once in your life, I would like [*you*] to respect and value our work.’
- (8) hay demasiadas cosas que ensombrecen lo que está haciendo *usted* en el ayuntamiento de Santa Cruz \ ⊥ tiene el caso de las Teresitas abierto\⊥ tiene el parque marítimo cerrado\⊥ tiene la anulación de la privatización de Emmasa\
 <Ma10EiEnv>
 ‘There are too many shadows over what *you* are doing at the town council. [*You*]’ve got the Teresitas affair still ongoing, [*you*]’ve got the sea park closed, [*you*]’ve got the overturning of the privatization of Emmasa...’

To sum up, omission of the subject *usted* / *ustedes* results in a more thematic and less focalized perception of referents, as well as in a more objective, evidential or truthful interpretation of utterances. This allows for the actualization of various traits of style in discursive interaction, including those related to (im)politeness.

In turn, expression of the subject is associated to the informational facet of salience. *Usted* tends to be formulated in those clauses where it is somehow perceived as a new or contrastive element. Once it has been introduced in textual progression, and in the absence of any particular stylistic intent, the most typical

¹⁰ Our previous research has shown that preverbal / postverbal placement of the subject may also convey (im)politeness (cf. Serrano & Aijón Oliva, forthcoming b).

solution for subsequent clauses shall be omission:

- (9) Yo creo que en aquella época \ *usted* estaba buscando \ permítame ⊥ que se lo diga así \ y poco crudamente \ estaba ⊥ buscando \ un puesto en la sociedad tinerfeña \ creyó ⊥ que ⊥ lo podía encontrar a través del patrocinio náutico \ y gastó ⊥ lo que no estaba escrito en aquel momento \ <Ma10E1Env>
 'I think in those times *you* pursued –if [*you*] will let me put it in such a crude way– [*you*] pursued a place amidst the Tenerife high society, and [*you*] thought [*you*] could gain it through nautical sponsorship, and so [*you*] spent a huge amount of money on that.'

When we find expression of already thematic subjects, some special communicative intention may be hypothesized. This will often have to do with stressing the agentivity or involvement of the second person in the perceptual scene. In excerpt (10), the insistence on *usted* would seem like an attempt to emphasize the convenience for the interlocutor to follow the instructions.

- (10) Presenta *usted* una nueva denuncia con su sentencia \ || insistir en que se ejecute la sentencia \ en el año 2000 fue? / en el año que puso *usted* la denuncia \ pues esa sentencia que tiene *usted* del 2003 intente que se ejecute por todos los medios posibles yendo a ese juzgado \ que se investigue si este señor tiene sueldo \ salario o pensiones \ <Ma10E1Env>
 'You have to file a new lawsuit based on the sentence ... Was it in 2000 that *you* filed your lawsuit? So that sentence *you*'ve had since 2003, [*you*] must try to get executed...'

The discursive-cognitive properties of subject expression can also engender stylistic meanings such as those related to politeness. This variant focuses on the presence of referents in the scene and thus may help emphasize their responsibility in the event described, both in a positive or negative fashion. It is the most typical solution when explicitly dignifying or praising the interlocutor.

- (11) *Usted* conoce profundamente La Laguna \ *usted* ha sido un estudioso de La Laguna \ (...) *usted* lo relataría con cierto toque de ironía \ pero sin que se le escape nada \ el argumento es muy lagunero ¿no? / <MA1020min>
 'You are an expert on the town of La Laguna, *you*'ve been a scholar on it... *You* recount it all with a touch of irony, but without missing a thing...'

Conversely, when the facts described are sensed as negative, the expression of *usted* will tend to stress confrontation or pejoration.

- (12) Los presupuestos que *usted* ha hecho son los que se pueden hacer \ pero a mí lo que me llama la atención es el escenario que se planifica a tres años vista \ serán las cifras de lo que va a pasar \ *usted* verá que los que estamos aquí \ (...) ¿*Usted* no cree

que para el año 2010 esto va a estar infinitamente peor?/¿como va recibir *usted* menos dinero porque el plan canario es una filfa?/ <Ma10EIEnv>

'The estimate *you*'ve made is as good as can be, but what grabs my attention is the scenario devised for the next three years... Don't *you* believe things will be infinitely worse by 2010? That *you* will be receiving much less money because the Canarian plan is just a scam?'

The following text exhibits some contrast between the initial omission of *usted* in an apparently objective question and its expression when the speaker starts confronting his interlocutor.

- (13) A. ¿Va a dimitir?
 B. Cómo se va a dimitir en un momento que hay nacionalismo emergente\y que no somos como otros\que son medianeros de Madrid aquí\
 A. ¿Usted \usted\ me está anunciando\que quiere a ser de nuevo alcalde de Santa Cruz?
 B. Falta un año y pico
 A. ¿Pero qué quiere ser *usted*? <Ma10EIEnv>
 'Are [you] going to resign? ... So *you* are telling me [you] expect to be elected as mayor of Santa Cruz again? ... What do *you* exactly expect?'

Thus it can be stated that the general, abstract notional values of omission and expression of *usted* / *ustedes* are materialized in various particular contextual meanings. The following table is an attempt to schematize the poles typically associated to each of the variants along several linguistic and communicative axes we have been alluding to. All these features should of course be understood as gradual values rather than as opposed and discrete traits.

	<i>Omission</i>	<i>Expression</i>
<i>Thematicity in cognitive context</i>	+ Thematic	- Thematic
<i>Informational status</i>	+ Known, - Contrastive	- Known, + Contrastive
<i>Pragmatic focus</i>	- On the referent	+ On the referent
<i>Semantic agentivity</i>	- Agentive	+ Agentive
<i>Utterance interpretation</i>	+ Evidential	- Evidential
<i>Propositional content</i>	+ Objective	- Objective
<i>Interactional politeness</i>	+/- Polite	+/- Polite ¹¹

¹¹ As we have seen, the polite or impolite interpretation of both variants depends largely on the context, particularly on whether the speaker is stressing vs. blurring the implication of the subject in a positive vs. negative fact.

Table 3. Omission and expression of *usted* / *ustedes* alongside several continua

Studying the specific meanings acquired by the variants across natural texts and connecting them to their intrinsic cognitive values implies a vision of socio-situational context as inseparable from the very existence of linguistic variation and the communicative styles it engenders. As will be seen, the notional bases of syntax may also shape meaningful quantitative patterns of social and situational variation.

5. *Usted* / *ustedes* across communicative situations and social groups

In the preceding section we investigated some interactional values of the expression and omission of *usted* / *ustedes* and explained them with reference to discursive and perceptual factors. Now it would be interesting to see whether the variants are quantitatively patterned across situations and social groups, as well as whether such distributions may also bear some relationship to their intrinsic meanings and stylistic realizations. First we have calculated the percentages of each variant in three main types of interaction included in the corpus: political debates and discussions (generally with the participation of broadcasters), talk magazines and personal interviews. The highest rate of express subjects is found in political debates, followed by magazines, whereas omission is notably more frequent in interviews.

	<i>Political debates</i>		<i>Talk magazines</i>		<i>Interviews</i>	
	<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Omission</i>	148	33.3	72	42.4	34	50%
<i>Expression</i>	297	66.7	98	57.6	34	50%
<i>Total</i>	445	100	170	100	68	100

Table 4. Omission and expression of *usted* / *ustedes* across three textual genres

Such results were fairly predictable. In interviews, the interaction runs most often among two people (interviewer and interviewee) and the interlocutor rarely needs to be disambiguated or informationally stressed. In most cases, expression of *usted* is due to interactional stylistic movements such as those discussed in Section 4. For instance, the image of the interviewee may be dignified by focusing on him/her as the protagonist of discourse.

- (14) Además compone *usted* por esa época\y ⊥ es autor\y coautor de algunas letras\que las seguimos oyendo con fuerza\ <Ma1020min>
'Besides, in those times *you* authored or co-authored some lyrics that are still often heard.'

As for talk magazines, the referent of the second person is quite variable even within a single turn: it can be one specific person, a group of them or the unspecific audience of the program, so the functions acquired by the pronouns are correspondingly more versatile, always evolving around the cognitive property of salience and its contextual manifestations, as shown before. Finally, political debates are eminently argumentative interactions where it is often necessary to address a specific person among others and place the pragmatic focus on him/her, sometimes with the aim of conveying pejoration.

- (15) Yo creo que *ustedes* han logrado un acuerdo escéptico\pero no tan buen acuerdo como *ustedes* están vendiendo\porque siguen ⊥ sin llegar a un acuerdo\ <MaDiEIEnv>
'I think *you*'ve reached at best a skeptical agreement, not such a good one as *you* are trying to sell us...'
- (16) Ha criticado/lo que *usted* antes decía/ que está fuera/con un partido casi marginal/¿*usted* cree que se puede seguir y gobernar con esa actitud?/ <Ma10EIEnv>
'[*You*]'ve criticized what *you* yourself said before: the fact of being in an almost marginal party. Do *you* really think it is possible to stay in office with such an attitude?'

The distribution across genres can explain not only variation among expressed and omitted subjects, but also the very use of *usted* / *ustedes* across texts. The intuitive notion of 'social distance' traditionally accorded to *usted* (as opposed to *tú*) may be perceived in the fact that it is the categorical form of address in political debates, while interviews and magazines display some variability in this respect. This might be explained as obedience to the different interactional norms imposed by textual genres, but social address is no doubt a personal choice by the speaker as well. Second-person pronouns have the power to single out certain people in discursive interaction while at the same time indexing a certain kind of relationship between them and the speaker, who is responsible of the choice between *usted* and *tú* even in situations a priori preferring or even demanding the use of a given variant. Therefore *usted* constitutes not only a second-person address form but also an option giving raise to the values discussed above.

Nonetheless, its categorical use in interactions among politicians and journalists might indicate that the socio-professional ascription of the speaker be

also relevant. We will analyze only these two groups of speakers since they produce the vast majority of items of *usted* / *ustedes*, whether express or omitted (97%). The scarce frequency achieved by other speakers indicates a special need on the part of broadcasters and politicians to index the second person in their discourse: they are the ones who take part in the most interactive situations and who generally initiate questions or demands.

<i>Professional group</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>
Journalists	364	53.3
Politicians	299	43.8
Others	20	2.9
<i>Total</i>	683	100

Table 5. Distribution of usted / ustedes according to professional groups

As regards expression and omission, we find a remarkably high rate of express *usted* in politicians, which is obviously relatable to the genre in which they most often participate (political debates), but could also index a preference of this group for such a variant regardless of the situation.

	<i>Journalists</i>		<i>Politicians</i>	
	<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Omission</i>	161	44.2	79	26.4
<i>Expression</i>	203	55.8	220	73.6
<i>Total</i>	364	100	299	100

Table 6. Expression and omission according to professional groups

Yet the latter hypothesis seems hard to test just by the calculation of percentages. To achieve deeper insight into aspects of social and situational variation, we have found it useful to quantify variation in absolute terms as well. In fact, linguistic variation should not be seen as just a matter of choice between supposedly competing forms, in the traditional fashion of correlational sociolinguistics and its 'relative' variables comprising two or more equivalent formal realizations. We can take a step forward if we also consider 'absolute' variables, understood as linguistic forms with intrinsic meaningful values and not

necessarily opposed to any others, which display different frequencies of appearance alongside other linguistic, social and situational aspects (*cf.* Aijón Oliva & Serrano, forthcoming b)¹².

Thus we have calculated overall frequencies of omission as well as that of expression per 10,000 words in the corpus. This method should help us better ascertain the role of professional ascription as regards variation of *usted / ustedes*. Whereas our previous analysis (see Table 5) showed that journalists accounted for 53.3% of the total cases of (express or not) *usted / ustedes* vs. 43.8% for politicians, now we discover that addressing the second person by means of these forms is in fact much more frequent in the latter group (98.5 cases vs. only 59 per 10,000 words).

<i>Group</i>	<i>Word count</i>	<i>Items of usted(es)</i>	<i>Frequency index</i>
Journalists	61,622	364	59
Politicians	30,340	299	98.5

Table 7. Absolute frequency of usted / ustedes according to professional groups

The bias in the relative data was of course due to the fact that, in a corpus of mass media texts, it is generally journalists that produce the largest amount of speech (as can be seen, their total word count doubles that of the other group). Now we can state that politicians tend to index the second person in discourse quite more frequently than journalists, and that this probably constitutes one in a set of communicative tools resourced to in order to accomplish certain interactional tasks. To certify this, it should be useful to also compare the absolute frequencies of just express *usted / ustedes*.

<i>Group</i>	<i>Word count</i>	<i>Items of expression</i>	<i>Frequency index</i>
Journalists	61,622	203	32.9
Politicians	30,340	220	72.5

Table 8. Absolute frequency of expression according to professional groups

¹² The procedure adopted here consists of calculating the frequency of a given form per 10,000 words. The total number of items has to be multiplied by 10,000 and then divided between the number of words in the corpus.

The frequency for politicians more than doubles that for broadcasters. The former are professionally oriented to the communicative functions of argumentation and persuasion, which prompts a tendency to directly and explicitly address their interlocutors. They will most often sacrifice the apparent objectivity suggested by subject omission in favor of achieving stronger pragmatic effects on their audiences by implicating them in the contents expressed.

Curiously enough, the overall frequencies of omission are almost exactly the same for both groups.

<i>Group</i>	<i>Word count</i>	<i>Items of omission</i>	<i>Frequency index</i>
Journalists	61,622	161	26.1
Politicians	30,340	79	26

Table 9. Absolute frequency of omission according to professional groups

Even if it seems clear that expression is the more frequent variant and that it is probably more socially and stylistically marked than omission, this does not in any case diminish the potential of the latter as an interactional resource, which was reviewed in Section 4. Omission helps integrate the subject in the background of the perceptual scene and thus avoids an excessive focalization on its referent when the facts discussed are felt as potentially discommoding to the interlocutor.

By now it should be evident that the quantitative patterns of group and genre distribution of the variants are hardly independent from their internal meanings and their stylistic actualization. The cognitive salience and semantic agentivity conveyed by express subjects are accountable for the predominance of this variant in the speech of politicians as well as in the media genre most typically associated to such speakers, that of political debates and discussions. Moving now a little further in our interpretation of the data, we might also suspect that the iconic meaning of 'distance' traditionally accorded to *usted / ustedes*, as well as their typical ascription to interactions where polite movements are the norm, make it easier for these pronouns to be formulated as many times as needed to make a point, but without running the risk of blatantly violating the basic requirements of interactional politeness in a public domain.¹³

Anyway, we have stated that the use of *usted / ustedes* can in itself be seen as a way of constructing meanings and styles. Their explicit formulation in texts seems to contribute (as is probably the case with all pronouns signaling human

¹³ It is our intuition that in these situations there is no such freedom to constantly repeat the more 'direct' address form *tú*. However, this will have to be corroborated by the corresponding empirical analyses on that form.

referents, and specially first- and second-person ones) to the shaping of a basic notional dimension we would call *subjectivity*, defined as an orientation of discourse to the personal sphere of participants rather than to the objective external reality. This in turn will be pragmatically reflected in more non-evidential, argumentative interpretations of utterances, that is, in subjectivity in a more everyday sense. It is little wonder that expression be prevalent in the situations and speakers most clearly oriented to argumentation and persuasion. Politicians will have a better chance of convincing their hearers by directly implicating them in the matters discussed. On the other hand, the distribution of expression and omission in the speech of journalists is more even; their discourse tends to objectivity due to their need to shape a self-image of professional impartiality. Thus at the pragmatic level they should favor a more evidential interpretation of utterances.

We can conclude that variation in the use of *usted / ustedes* is indicative of different communicative styles used to accomplish different communicative goals. In our corpus, speakers move along the objectivity / subjectivity and evidentiality / non-evidentiality axes in order to better accomplish the discursive realization of their professional roles. They are able to modulate syntactic variation towards the achievement of communicative goals and on the basis of its discursive-cognitive properties.

6. Concluding remarks

The variable phenomena approached in this work had been previously studied from merely grammatical or at best discursive viewpoints. Researchers have seldom been interested in *usted* by itself, but rather by the fact that it enters an opposition of address forms with the properly second-person pronoun *tú*. We have carried out an analysis of expression and omission of *usted / ustedes* in themselves, taking cognitive factors as a theoretical basis and trying to elucidate whether such factors are projected on interactional dynamics as well as on patterns of social and situational distribution. Such an investigation is inspired by the belief that any linguistic form is endowed with a unique meaning. Due to the intrinsically iconic and experiential nature of grammar, each formal choice has a value per se and not just by opposition to other possible ones.

At the methodological level, the consideration of ‘absolute’ variables and the calculation of total frequencies of forms have proved to be very useful in ascertaining the density of use of the variants across genres and social groups. In particular, we have been able to certify a remarkably high rate of express *usted / ustedes* among politicians and in political debates, which is in turn relatable to the cognitively-based communicative potential of this syntactic variant.

All this supports a conception of language as creation rather than structure,

and puts the onus on variationist sociolinguistics to rid itself of taken-for-granted assumptions and search for alternative and more comprehensive analytic frames. The cognitive properties of syntactic choices are crucial to the shaping and development of sociolinguistic variation in human communities. Given the current state of knowledge, linguistic forms and social and situational features can no longer be conceived of as independent matters; the integration of all such aspects within a socio-cognitive approach is no doubt a very promising prospect for today's sociolinguistics (*cf.* Kristiansen & Dirven 2008).

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