

# Variation in the *voseo* and *tuteo* Negative Imperatives in Argentine Spanish

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## 1 Introduction

Throughout the Spanish-speaking world there is quite a bit of variation in the second person singular verb forms and pronouns (Fontanella de Weinberg 1995–1996, 1997, Benavides 2003). The use of the pronoun *tú* and its corresponding verb forms is found in most of or all of Spain, Mexico, Panama, Colombia, Peru, Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. The use of the pronoun *vos* and its corresponding verb forms is found in the rest of Central America, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Venezuela, Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador (Benavides 2003). Among the many *voseante* countries in the Spanish-speaking world, there is some variation in the verb forms affected. Despite the use of the pronoun *vos*, some verb inflections may remain in the *tú* form, while others take the *vos* form (Fontanella de Weinberg 1995–1996, Moyna 2008). Argentine Spanish (AS) is a dialect that is mostly *voseante* but includes an interesting alternation between the negative imperative that comes from the *tuteo* (TNI) and the *voseo* negative imperative (VNI):

- (1) a. ¡No me hables más! ‘Don’t talk to me anymore!’ (VNI)  
b. No hables más con las empleadas, porque estamos tarde. ‘Don’t talk with the help anymore, because we are late.’ (TNI)  
(Sos mi vida 2006).

These alternating imperatives are accompanied by a difference in pragmatic meaning, discussed below (Fontanella de Weinberg 1979, Johnson and Grinstead 2010). This paper serves to explore the degree to which this pragmatic difference is manifested through various social variables including gender, age and geography.

## 2 The *Voseo* and *Tuteo* Alternation in Argentine Spanish

The alternation between the VNI and the TNI in AS has been studied since the 1970s (Fontanella de Weinberg 1970, 1976, 1977, 1979, 1995–1996, Moyna and Ceballos 2008, Siracusa 1972). Moyna and Ceballos (2008) take a historical perspective on the alternation, exploring the order in which different verb forms favored the *voseo* over the *tuteo* historically;<sup>1</sup> it began in the imperative,<sup>2</sup> then moved to the present indicative, and finally to the present subjunctive. It is important to note that the negative imperatives found in Spanish today come from the present subjunctive. Moyna and Ceballos also explore the development of the semantic difference, namely that the VNI is an “imperious” command, conveying anger or impatience. They find that before 1880, because the *voseo* overlapped with the *tuteo*, there was an alternation between the two pronouns within the same discourse, and also mismatches between pronouns and accompanying verbs. Both forms co-existed for some time. After 1880, we see a rapid increase in *voseo* usage in all paradigms except in the present subjunctive, where the alternation remained. Moyna and Ceballos note that while children were acquiring the language, they had a doublet in their input for second person present subjunctive, and they had to choose a form. The smaller amount of input in embedded clauses, as well as mixed input, resulted in “random use of the subjunctive forms”

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<sup>1</sup>Note that when I use the terms *tuteo* and *voseo* by themselves, I am referring to the use of the pronoun *tú* and its corresponding verb forms in various tenses and moods, and the use of the pronoun *vos* and its corresponding verb forms in various tenses and moods. When I am referring specifically to the *voseo* negative imperative and the *tuteo* negative imperative, I will use the abbreviations TNI and VNI.

<sup>2</sup>Note that this refers to the affirmative imperatives, since the negative imperative is not a true imperative syntactically, but rather comes from the present subjunctive.

(Moyna and Ceballos 2008:137). Moyna and Ceballos say the children of the next generation developed a semantic specialization to differentiate the alternating forms. The fact that there are two distinct uses for the subjunctive in Spanish—for irrealis and for deontic/imperative meanings—permitted the *voseo* subjunctive to appear first as negative imperatives, and later in embedded clauses.

Fontanella de Weinberg (1979) notes that the *voseo* forms are used for peremptory orders, whereas the *tuteo* forms are used for more courteous commands. To test this semantic difference, she tested 12 informants (3 males and 9 females). They were given a group of sentences with commands in various forms. Among these sentences were also included the two forms of negative imperatives: *No mirés para allá* ‘Don’t look over there (VNI)’ and *No mires para allá* ‘Don’t look over there (TNI)’. The informants ranked each sentence according to the following 5 point scale: 1) polite request, 2) courteous order, 3) neutral order, 4) strict order, and 5) forceful order. Fontanella de Weinberg found that the TNI had an average ranking of 2.3 and the VNI had an average ranking of 3.7. This suggests a difference in meaning between the two forms. She also notes in a footnote (presumably due to the small number of participants), however, that men had more extreme rankings, with an average ranking of 2 for the VNI and 4 for the TNI. She says that this suggests a higher level of consciousness among men about the semantic difference.

Johnson and Grinstead (2010) explored this difference further, examining the use of negative imperatives in the Argentine soap opera “*Sos Mi Vida*.” All negative imperatives were extracted from 19 hours of the program. From this analysis, investigators noted that the TNI seemed to be found felicitously in all contexts, while the VNI seemed to be marked for urgency. Urgent contexts are defined as those in which the speaker requires an immediate response from the interlocutor, and thus include contexts that may seem more serious or angrier than the non-urgent contexts. In order to explore this hypothesis, the investigators collected data in an online survey. Participants were provided with 10 contexts depicting urgent situations, and 10 corresponding non-urgent contexts (see (2) and (3)). They were asked to choose among responses containing a VNI, a TNI or “either.” Results showed that the VNI was used significantly more in urgent contexts than in non-urgent contexts ( $p < .001$ ), and suggested that the VNI was restricted to urgent contexts, while the TNI was unrestricted.

### 3 Methodology

An online survey (the same from Johnson and Grinstead 2010) using Survey Monkey was distributed and completed by 151 self-identified adult native speakers of Argentine Spanish (110 females and 41 males). The survey was distributed in two different orders so as to counterbalance the order in which each participant received each context. All participants had to acknowledge using both the TNI and the VNI forms in their speech in order to take the survey. Participants included speakers from the provinces of Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Entre Ríos, Mendoza, Neuquén, Río Negro, Salta, San Juan, and Santa Fé. They were also asked to provide the city they were from, their level of education (elementary, secondary, university or postgraduate), their sex, and their age (18–25, 26–35, 36–45, 46–55, 55+).

Participants were given 10 contexts depicting urgent situations and 10 corresponding non-urgent contexts. For each context respondents were to choose the response that they would say from a given set of options. These options always included a TNI, a VNI and “either.” Example contexts can be found in (2) and (3).

(2) Urgent context:

You are in an ice cream shop and you order vanilla ice cream. The girl who works there says “ok” but then you see her serve you chocolate ice cream. You don’t want chocolate. Which of the following options would you say to her?

- a. Don’t serve me chocolate (VNI)
- b. Don’t serve me chocolate (TNI)
- d. Either

(3) Non-urgent context:

You are in an ice cream shop and you can’t decide what kind of ice cream you want, but you don’t want chocolate. The girl who works there asks what flavor you want. Which of

the following options would you say to her?

- a. Any, but don't serve me chocolate (VNI)
- b. Any, but don't serve me chocolate (TNI)
- d. Either

Responses were coded by the type of answer (VNI, TNI or either), order, and the social variables mentioned above. Given the uneven distribution across provinces, location was narrowed down using the city of residence, and each speaker was coded as being from the capital (Buenos Aires, CF), from the province of Buenos Aires (but not the capital), or from outside of the province of Buenos Aires.

Recall the results from the pragmatic analysis in Johnson and Grinstead (2010), which indicate that the TNI is unrestricted by context but that the VNI is licensed only in urgent contexts. Since an "either" response indicates that a VNI was possible, "either" was coded as a VNI for this analysis.

After eliminating those speakers who demonstrated invariance or near invariance<sup>3</sup> in their responses, 119 participants remained, including 87 females and 32 males. Data was analyzed using Rbrul in order to determine which social variables played a role in the choice of VNI or TNI, and to what degree. Rbrul was chosen for this analysis given its ability to work with mixed-effects models (Johnson 2009). Speaker was included as a random effect, and the aforementioned social factors were included as fixed effects. This way, we were able to determine which social factors play a role in the choice of negative imperatives without ignoring the effects of inter-speaker variation. The complete data set was run as a whole, and then the urgent contexts were separated from the non-urgent contexts in order to determine whether the same factors were significant in both contexts.

## 4 Results

The distribution of the negative imperatives across the social factors can be seen in Table 1.

|   | VNI       | TNI        |
|---|-----------|------------|
| <b>Sex</b>  |           |            |
| Female  | 689 (40%) | 1051 (60%) |
| Male  | 319 (50%) | 321 (50%)  |
| Chi-square = 20.1, degrees of freedom = 1, p < .001 |           |            |
| <b>Age</b>  |           |            |
| 18-25   | 270 (48%) | 290 (52%)  |
| 26-35   | 299 (38%) | 481 (62%)  |
| 36-45   | 218 (44%) | 282 (56%)  |
| 46-55   | 174 (41%) | 246 (59%)  |
| 55+   | 47 (39%)  | 73 (61%)   |
| Chi-square = 14, degrees of freedom = 4, p = .007   |           |            |
| <b>Education</b>                                    |           |            |
| Secondary   | 54 (45%)  | 66 (55 %)  |
| University  | 754 (43%) | 1006 (57%) |
| Graduate  | 200 (40%) | 300 (60%)  |
| Chi-square = 1.65, degrees of freedom = 2, p = .438 |           |            |
| <b>Location</b>                                     |           |            |
| Capital   | 616 (41%) | 884 (59%)  |
| BA province   | 181 (41%) | 259 (59%)  |
| Outside BA  | 211 (48%) | 229 (52%)  |
| Chi-square = 6.94, degrees of freedom = 2, p = .031 |           |            |

Table 1: Distribution of negative imperatives across social factors in overall data (raw numbers).

<sup>3</sup>Near invariance was taken as only one response differing from the rest.

Based on the raw numbers, females seem to use the VNI less than males do, and less than they use the TNI. Males use the TNI and the VNI the same amount of time. Of all age groups, the youngest use the VNI the most. Nevertheless, the occurrence of VNI in the youngest age group is only one percent lower than that of the oldest age group, and no clear pattern is seen throughout the age groups that indicates a change over time. All age groups use the TNI more than the VNI. Education seems to influence the choice in negative imperatives, as the amount of VNI use appears to decrease as education level increases. Still, the TNI is the preferred form across all education levels. It appears that outside of the province of Buenos Aires, speakers use the VNI more than they do inside the province and in the capital. Nevertheless, the TNI is used more across all speakers regardless of location. Still, these are the results of the raw counts. A multivariate analysis will allow us to take all factors into account in order to determine which are the factors that best explain the variation found. The results of the mixed-effects model on the complete data set can be seen in Table 2.

|                | Log-odds | Tokens    | Factor weight |       |            |
|----------------|----------|-----------|---------------|-------|------------|
| <b>Sex</b>     |          |           |               |       |            |
| Male           | .23      | 640       | .583          |       |            |
| Female         | -.23     | 1740      | .469          |       |            |
| <b>Speaker</b> |          |           |               |       |            |
| Std dev. = .74 |          |           |               |       |            |
| Deviance       | df       | Intercept | Mean          | Total | Input prob |
| 3096.947       | 3        | -0.239    | .424          | 2380  | .414       |

Table 2: Rbrul's best mixed-effects model for the choice of VNI or TNI in the overall data (application value = VNI).

The Rbrul analysis shows that speaker and sex are the two significant factors that affect the choice between the VNI and the TNI such that males favor the use of the VNI and females disfavor it.

Next, an Rbrul analysis was run on the data separately for urgent contexts and non-urgent contexts in order to determine if there was a difference in social conditioning across contexts. Results, as seen in Tables 3 and 4, indicate that there is a difference.

|                 |    |           |      |
|-----------------|----|-----------|------|
| <b>Speaker</b>  |    |           |      |
| Std dev. = .878 |    |           |      |
| Deviance        | df | Intercept | Mean |
| 1568.12         | 2  | .255      | .553 |

Table 3: Rbrul's best mixed-effects model for the choice of VNI or TNI in the data for urgent contexts (application value = VNI).

|                 | Log-odds |           | Tokens |       | Factor weight |
|-----------------|----------|-----------|--------|-------|---------------|
| <b>Sex</b>      |          |           |        |       |               |
| Male            | .297     |           | 320    |       | .607          |
| Female          | −.297    |           | 870    |       | .46           |
| <b>Speaker</b>  |          |           |        |       |               |
| Std dev. = .844 |          |           |        |       |               |
| Deviance        | df       | Intercept | Mean   | Total | Input prob    |
| 1379.053        | 3        | −0.885    | .294   | 1190  | .265          |

Table 4: Rbrul's best mixed-effects model for the choice of VNI or TNI in the data for non-urgent contexts (application value = VNI).

Results from the separate analyses for urgent and non-urgent contexts demonstrate that the effect that sex had on the overall data came from the non-urgent contexts, as sex had no such effect on the urgent contexts. Significant speaker effects were found in all of the models.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

Among the fixed factors in the overall data, it is clear that sex is the factor that most affects the choice of negative imperative. Males favor the VNI, while females disfavor it. If Fontanella de Weinberg's (1979) suggestion that males are more conscious of the pragmatic distinction between the two negative imperatives were correct, we might expect a greater difference in use across contexts for males, such that the VNI would be even more restricted to urgent contexts, and even less used in non-urgent contexts. This, however, is not what we find. In non-urgent contexts, males favor the VNI while females disfavor it. In urgent contexts, sex is not a significant factor conditioning the choice of negative imperative. Therefore, the results of this study do not indicate that males are more attuned to the pragmatic difference between the two negative imperatives, as Fontanella de Weinberg suggested, but rather that they are more willing to use the VNI in non-urgent contexts than females are. In fact, participants were allowed to leave comments on each page of the survey, and one female participant who selected many VNI responses left two telling comments. The first said, “¿No seré muy agresiva para tratar a la gente?” (‘Aren’t I pretty aggressive in the way I treat people?’), and the second was, “soy algo masculina al hablar” (‘I’m somewhat masculine in the way I speak’). Further social analysis would be interesting in order to explain this gender difference, which could be a reflection of qualities generally associated with males more than females, such as aggression.

Despite the relatively large sample size, speaker effects were found in all models, indicating a large amount of cross-speaker variation not explained by our social factors. A larger or more evenly distributed sample would be helpful in order to narrow down any other social factors that may condition the choice. It is interesting to note that when speaker was not included as a random effect, age came out as a significant factor such that the youngest participants favored the VNI and the rest of the participants disfavored it. Our sample had very few older speakers, as can be seen in Table 5.

| Age            | 18-25      | 26-35      | 36-45    | 46-55      | 55+    | Total |
|----------------|------------|------------|----------|------------|--------|-------|
| # Participants | 28 (23.5%) | 39 (32.8%) | 25 (21%) | 21 (17.6%) | 6 (5%) | 119   |

Table 5: Age distribution of complete data set.

Perhaps with a more evenly distributed sample with respect to age, this factor would have come out above the speaker effects as significant.

The results of this study expand on the work that has already been done on the alternation between the two negative imperatives in this variety. The online survey provided a means to a large sample size (although, admittedly, this method limited the range of social class and age of the participants reached), and the fixed response format of the survey allowed us to obtain enough tokens of negative imperatives for the multivariate analysis. By examining a variety of social factors, this study brings a clearer picture to the factors that govern the choice of the VNI or the TNI in Argentine Spanish.

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