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Es mi Shakespeare su Shakespeare? Pronoun Formality in Spanish Translations of Hamlet

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The English language is different from the other widely spoken languages of western Europe in that it lacks a distinction between the formal and informal second person pronoun. However, this was not always the case. French influence introduced the distinction between a formal form address (“you”) and an informal one (“thou”), mirroring the *vous/tu* divide in French (Fitzmaurice). However, the distinction of usage in English between you and thee was never as concrete as that in other Western European languages. As a result, the gradual diminution in the use of the informal address was not quite as jarring to common speech as it might have been were a similar transition to have occurred in French or German.

Nevertheless, the transition from a language with both a formal and informal form of address to one with one a single, egalitarian mode was both driven by and influential on future cultural developments. By the late 16th and early 17th centuries, thou was entering decline (Fitzmaurice). The lack of hierarchical pronouns in English makes social status mode ambiguous, both among individuals speaking with each other, who do not have the ability to convey intimacy or status with a single word, but also to third party observers. While many other social cues serve to demonstrate the extent to which a relationship is hierarchical, English has no marker as plain as a pronoun shift for an observer to analyze. This is a shift with major literary significance, especially in drama.

While Shakespeare’s plays make extensive use of soliloquy to provide insight into the inner lives of their characters, not every figure has the luxury of the chance to speak directly to the audience about their motivation and opinions. This includes minor characters, many of whom are not even given the privilege of a name in the *dramatis personae*, as well as major characters. The use of formal or informal address would have been, at the time of the writing of the plays, one way to show nuance in the relationship between characters on the fly, as well as to indicate the workings

of the minds that Shakespeare did not choose to explicate with asides or soliloquys. These shifts, when understood, can be brought to life by an actor, and thereby conveyed to a modern audience that frequently does not know the significance of the pronoun shift from you to thee and back again. While each individual shift can be critical for the relationship of the two characters in a conversation, the total number of usages of the formal and informal address has the potential to explain to the scholarly audience the general character of the relationships in a play, or even in a set of plays.

This study attempted to use text mining to examine the changes in Shakespeare's pronoun use over time and between genres in Shakespeare's plays in English. It then used the same method to examine the differences in translation choices by three different Spanish translations of *Hamlet*. In doing so, it revealed several key findings about the methods translators use, as well as the limits of a text mining approach without an adequate baseline to which to compare statistics. Throughout this project, the metric used to examine the overall formality of a play or scene was the ratio of formal to informal pronouns. This metric was used as it provided an internal normalization for the varying lengths of Shakespeare's plays and their varying use of pronouns per word. No statistically significant covariation was found between the number of pronouns used and their formality (see *Supplementary Figure 1*). As will be addressed later, the use of a ratio of formal to informal pronouns is a more useful benchmark when comparing different works than different translations of the same play.

Shakespeare's plays were written during a roughly twenty-year period of intense linguistic and cultural change, from about 1590 to about 1612. At the center of this stretch was the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, whose rule had gone on so long that many of her subjects had never known another monarch. Shakespeare, whose troupe frequently performed for the regnant

monarch, wrote inspired by and in response to the social changes of his time. The period of Shakespeare's activity was one of a rapid loss of the informal form of address. It has previously been suggested that, in response to this loss, Shakespeare reduced the number of informal pronouns in his later plays, reflecting their decreased use in the vernacular (Freedman). However, this change is not borne out by the data on his usage of formality. While there is a slight upward trend in the formality of Shakespeare's plays over time ($R^2 = 0.2297$, see *Figure 1*), there is reason to proceed with caution when interpreting it.

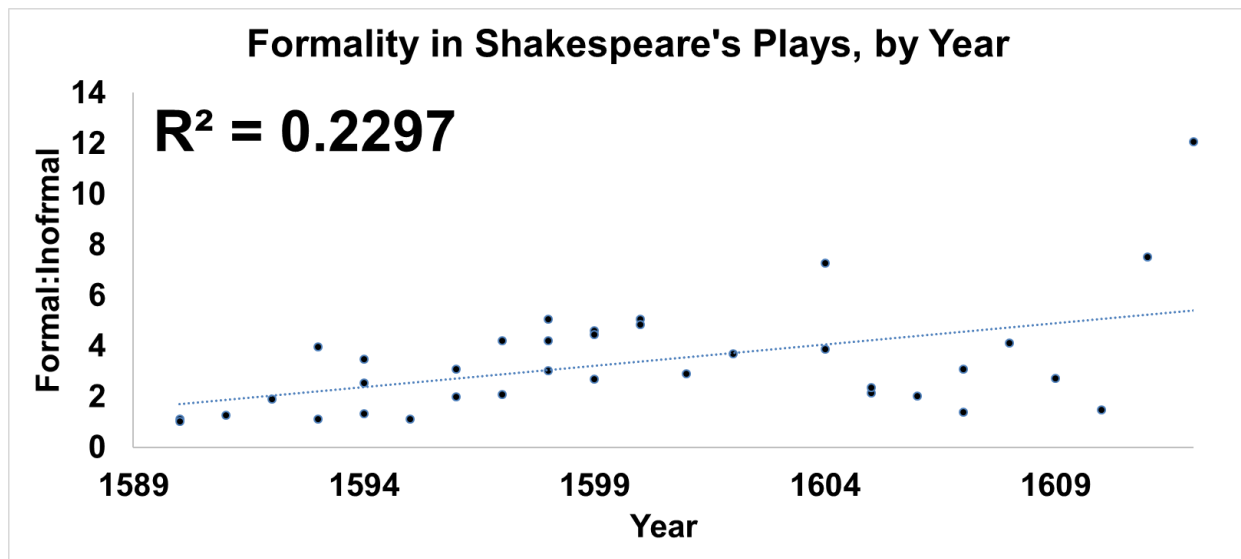


Figure 1: Formality in Shakespeare's Plays, by Year, using the chronology of Open Source Shakespeare

Henry VIII, one of Shakespeare's least performed and last plays, was also by far his most formal. It was also unusually politically charged, even for the adventurous Bard, as it directly referred to historical characters whose lives had only recently ended. After all, Henry VIII was the father of a queen who had died less than a decade before the writing of his eponymous history. These facts are important, because the placing of *Henry VIII* at the end of the relatively small historical dataset has enormous impact on the trend toward formality found in Shakespeare's work over time. In

fact, *Henry VIII* accounts for almost half the variation in formality in Shakespeare's play over time by itself. When it is removed from the set, the positive correlation between year of composition and the ratio of formal to informal pronouns falls dramatically ($R^2 = 0.1336$). It is not absurd to think that this remaining correlation reflects some shift in overall usage of the informal pronoun, but it also calls out for other lenses through which to examine the shifts in Shakespeare's pronoun use.

Shakespeare's plays overall average 3.39 uses of the formal address for every use of the informal address. However, the variation in this figure is large, as the standard error of the value is 0.344. Moreover, when examining the plays by genre, interesting patterns emerge (see *Figure 2*, for the constituents of each genre, see *Supplementary Table 1*).

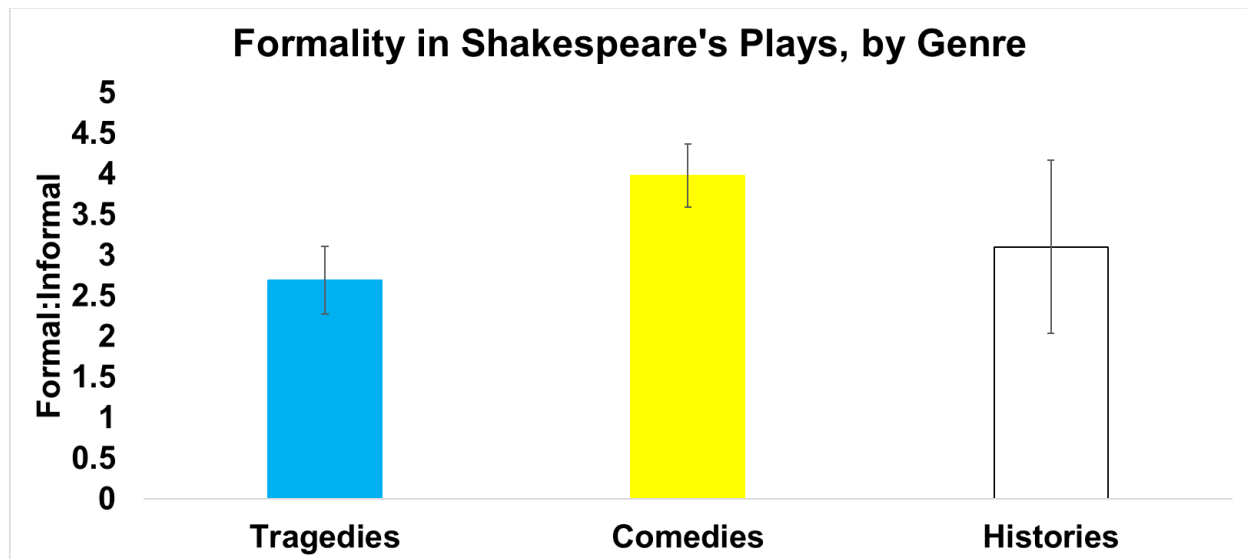


Figure 2: Formality in Shakespeare's Plays, by Genre, values represent average of the ratio of formal to informal pronouns \pm S.E.M.

While the lightheartedness of Shakespeare's comedies might encourage the casual reader imagine that they are relatively informal affairs, the comedies are actually Shakespeare's most formal genre, with an average of 3.98 uses of the formal address for every informal address. On the other

hand, the tragedies feature a great deal more informality, using only 2.68 formal address for every informal address. The histories are a more complicated case. The histories include some of the least formal of Shakespeare's plays (*Henry VI, Part 3*, formal:informal = 1.03) and the most formal (the aforementioned *Henry VIII*, formal:informal = 12.07). This tension is reflected in the fact that the histories average 3.10 uses of the formal address for every informal address, but have a very large standard error (1.06). Each of these classes genres deserves significant internal analysis, especially considering that each represents a relatively small sample size (for example, in the case of the tragedies $n = 10$). However, a genre-based analysis does more than a solely temporal one in explaining the variation in Shakespeare's pronoun use over time. The histories are relatively informal with the notable exception of *Henry VII*. This is especially true in the case of the three parts of *Henry VI*, all of which are among Shakespeare's least formal and earliest plays. The placement of these four plays at either end of Shakespeare's career accounts for 76.7% of the variation in formality over the twenty-year span. While the choices of formality in each of these plays may itself be a result of linguistic variation over this period, it is unlikely that such a trend would have a large impact on the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Henry VIII* but not reveal itself in Shakespeare's other plays. As a result, the hypothesis that Shakespeare's changes in formality were shaped largely by linguistic trends of the day must be reconsidered. Instead, a more thorough analysis of the story structures that led to greater formality in the comedies and lesser formality in the tragedies is in order.

Having examined Shakespeare's use of pronouns to translate the formality of relationships into dialogue, I then proceeded to examine three translations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into Spanish. Spanish continues to have a robust distinction between the formal (usted) and informal (tu) address. The informal plural address (vosotros) is moribund in Latin American Spanish. To

avoid confronting this as a confounding variable, my analysis was limited to translations from Spain. This had the beneficial side effect of reducing the extent to which other dialectical variations confounded analysis as well. The three translations chosen were the 1798 translation by Leandro Moratin (under the *nom de plume* Inarco Celenio), the 1903 translation of Luis López-Ballesteros and Felix Gonzalez Llana, and the 1905 translation of J. Roviralta Borrell. The undertaking of data collection in Spanish was significantly more difficult than in English, due to the fact that the conjugation of Spanish verbs renders the use of the pronoun optional in many cases. As a result, rather than using a search function to locate the formal and informal pronouns used in the texts, each one had to be read and second person addresses coded by hand. While I checked each translation in triplicate without finding discrepancies in my counts, the values of pronoun usage may be treated as slightly less authoritative than the English values described above. Due to the small sample size of translations, analysis was extended to each scene within the play, as well as the translations as a whole. Also of note is that in all three translations, the “normal” formal mode of address, *usted*, is entirely absent. Instead, reflecting the fact that nearly all the superordinates in the play are either royal or of high noble families, formal address is restricted to the *voseo reverencial* (Carricaburo). The *voseo reverencial* consists of the use of the informal plural address, *vosotros*, as a formal, singular address. This norm of use is somewhat confusing in *Hamlet*, specifically, as there are numerous scenes (for example, Act II, Scene 2) when a single superordinate addresses two subordinates (King Claudius, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern respectively) in which all parties use the pronoun “vosotros,” but use it to convey very different meanings.

The first finding which stands out dramatically is the extent to which the English is more formal than any of the Spanish translations in any scene (See *Figure 3*).

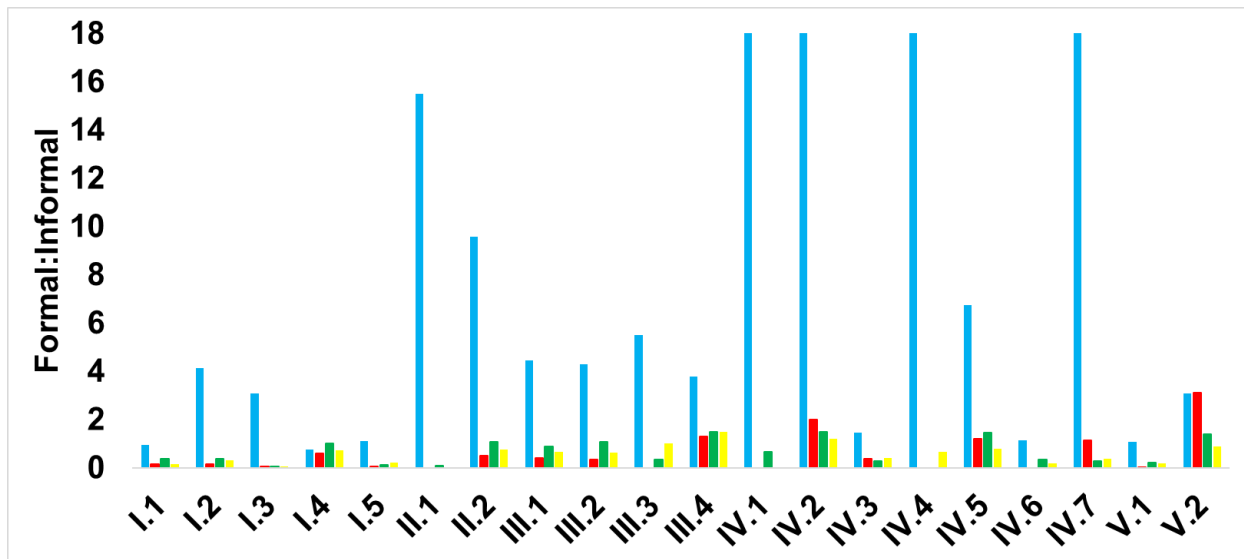


Figure 3: *Formality in Hamlet by Scene*, blue bars represent Shakespeare's original English, red bars represent the translation of López-Ballesteros and Gonzalez, green bars represent the translation of Borrell, and yellow bars represent the translation of Moratin.

In fact, Act IV Scenes 1, 2, 4 and 6 do not feature the use of any informal pronouns at all. This difference reflects the fact that equals of upper class status tended to use the formal address amongst each other, even when some power dynamic separated them. For example, in Act I, Scene 3, Ophelia and Laertes address each other, and are usually addressed by Polonius, their father, using the same pronoun (“What is’t, Ophelia, he hath said to you?”). Notably, when Polonius assumes the role of sage giver of advice, he begins addressing Laertes by the informal (“To thine own self be true”). This social leveling is not present in the Spanish translations. In López-Ballesteros & Gonzalez’s *Hamlet*, the children address each other by the familiar pronoun, but both address their father reverentially. Polonius, in turn addresses his children using the familiar, indicating a difference in rank or a lack of respect for their autonomy that is not present in the original. This illustrates one of the fundamental challenges of translating formality into a language with strong norms as to how it should be used, including the norm that children address their parents formally. While English audiences miss the nuances of the shift from you to thee in

Polonius' speeches unless they have been made aware of them previously, Spanish audiences are not exposed to the relationships Shakespeare is attempting to portray in an unfiltered way. The differences in norms of use between "you" and the voseo reverencial is such that the portrayal of the attitude of equality between Polonius and his children would sound discordant to the Spanish ear.

Another way in which the strictness of the distinction between formal and informal address in Spanish forces translators to make difficult choices is seen in the extent to which the original *Hamlet*, but not its translations, is able to portray its characters' changes in attitude toward each other with in-scene pronoun shifts. For example, in Act III, Scene 4, Queen Gertrude begins the scene addressing her son, and inferior with the informal in both English and Spanish. However, in a moment of fear, after he has begun talking to what she sees as thin air, and he sees as the host of his father, Gertrude slips into the formal with her son ("Alas, how is't with you"). This shift is not present in any of the Spanish translations, in which it would be exceeding odd for a regnant consort to address any of her husband's subjects in a formal manner. Though the queen eventually returns to the normalcy (or intimacy) of addressing her son informally ("Thou hast cleft my heart in twain"), the extent to which Gertrude's world has been upended by the apparent madness of her son is lost to readers of the translations sampled. This is another example of subtle nuance which was allowed in Shakespeare's English, but very few other languages of expression, including modern English and Spanish.

As mentioned above, the sampled translators of *Hamlet* tended to preserve norms of use, rather than translating the shifts in pronoun use directly. However, there were occasions where the shift was obvious enough in the original that it was reflected in the translation. Having broken into the palace at the head of a peasant army in Act IV, Scene 5, Laertes is sufficiently emboldened to

address Claudius informally (“O thou vile king/Give me my father”). This informality, and the subsequent return to formal address when Laertes is convinced that the King is not guilty of Polonius’ murder, is reflected in both Moratin and Borrell’s translation. The line, despite its fame in English, is notably absent from the López-Ballesteros & Gonzalez translation. Thus, when a shift in pronoun formality is pronounced, it appears that it can sneak through, even when it does so against norms of use (i.e. one uses the formal address when speaking to a regnant monarch).

The three above case studies all address interesting choices by translators of *Hamlet* into Spanish. However, none of these nuances “pop out” of the statistical analysis of pronoun use. In fact, the scenes in which the ratio of formal to informal pronouns vary the most tend to reflect choices in sentence structure that randomly eliminated some direct addresses and not others, rather than modulations of formality between characters within the play itself. Consequently, in the future, this method is likely best applied to different works, for example, books of the King James Bible, or to compare works by Shakespeare with those of his contemporaries, rather than translations of the same work, in which normalizing pronoun usage is difficult. As with any statistical method, a larger sample size would also aid future analyses addressing pronoun formality. This study, finally, has served to highlight the importance of close reading to literary analysis, even when high throughput methods are available. Much in literature, especially in great literature, hinges on a single word.

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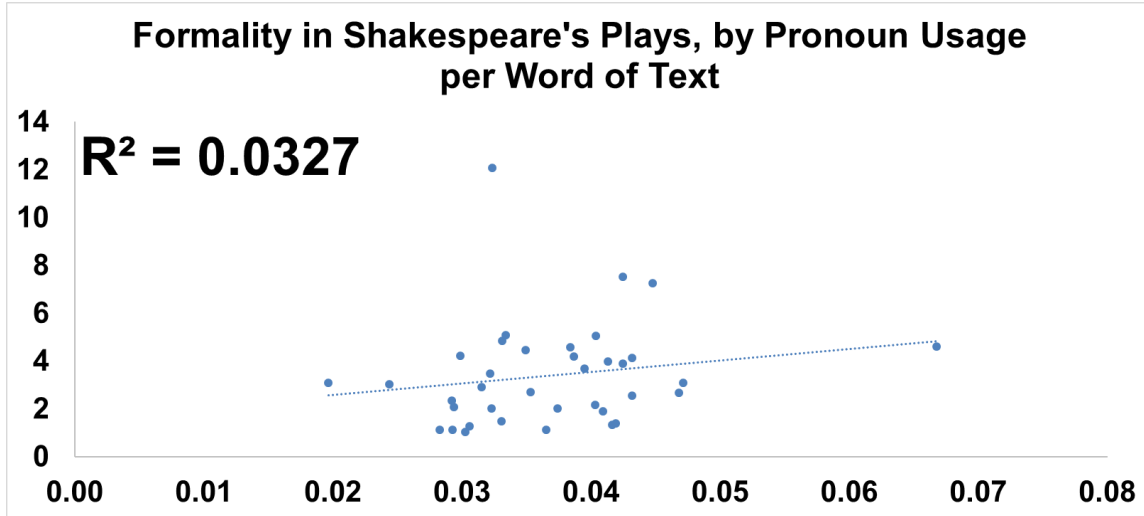
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Supplementary Figures



Supplementary Figure 1: Formality in Shakespeare's Plays, by Pronoun Usage per Word of Text

Supplementary Table 1: List of Plays by Genre (Courtesy of MIT Shakespeare)

| Tragedies | Comedies | Histories |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> | <i>All's Well That Ends Well</i> | <i>Henry IV, part 1</i> |
| <i>Coriolanus</i> | <i>As You Like It</i> | <i>Henry IV, part 2</i> |
| <i>Hamlet</i> | <i>The Comedy of Errors</i> | <i>Henry V</i> |
| <i>Julius Caesar</i> | <i>Cymbeline</i> | <i>Henry VI, part 1</i> |
| <i>King Lear</i> | <i>Love's Labours Lost</i> | <i>Henry VI, part 2</i> |
| <i>Macbeth</i> | <i>Measure for Measure</i> | <i>Henry VI, part 3</i> |
| <i>Othello</i> | <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i> | <i>Henry VIII</i> |
| <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> | <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> | <i>King John</i> |
| <i>Timon of Athens</i> | <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> | <i>Richard II</i> |
| <i>Titus Andronicus</i> | <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> | <i>Richard III</i> |
| | <i>Pericles, Prince of Tyre</i> | |
| | <i>Taming of the Shrew</i> | |
| | <i>The Tempest</i> | |
| | <i>Troilus and Cressida</i> | |
| | <i>Twelfth Night</i> | |
| | <i>Two Gentlemen of Verona</i> | |
| | <i>Winter's Tale</i> | |