Spanish has three pronouns available for the singular second person: usted, tú, and vos. The latter disappeared in Spain during the 18th century. In general, usted is the formal address, while tú and vos are its informal counterparts. The verbal system marks the selected address in the conjugation. This pronominal marking implies a wide range of possibilities for variation, constrained by pragmatic, social, and linguistic factors. The issue has attracted interest among researchers, although none has taken a variationist approach (e.g. Fontanella 1977, 1994, Hummel et al 2010, Newall 2007, Benavides 2003, Páez Urdaneta 1981, Rona 1960). This absence of research has hindered the progress in the area on Spanish terms of address, in which the historical development is the most understudied. Thus, the question on which factors affect the selection of vos against tú or usted remains to be answered.

In this paper, I analyze language variation and change of singular second person pronouns in Colombian Spanish, using written data from 1884 through 1974. I selected six novels from two regions, the Southwest (1942, 1972, and 1974), and the Central Highlands (1884 and 1937). I extracted 523 tokens of dialog in which the characters use any term of address in the nominative, either with the overt or covert pronoun. I coded this data according to the following linguistic factors: (1) presence of an insulting word; (2) Tense, Aspect, and Mood (TAM) features; (3) main or subordinate sentence; (4) statement or question; and (5) type of verb-type (existential, communication, movement, activity, among others). Among the social factors, I coded (1) status, (2) gender, and (3) race of the speaker with respect to the hearer. These variables were analyzed in a multi-variate statistical analysis, focusing on vos against tú and usted.

Results show that the presence of an insulting word, the imperative mood, the present indicative, and subordinate sentences favor the usage of vos. Among social factors, vos is dominant when the addressee is an animal or an inanimate object, less so when speaker is a person of equal status, and even less when the speaker is inferior. It is also dominant when women address men. Comparing each of the years separately, we find that the presence of an insulting word is significant until 1942, and status, until 1937. Gender is significant through history, but is higher for women until 1942, and for men in 1972 and 1974.

These results reveal an evolution on how authors perceived usage of vos. The presence of an insulting word is not significant in 1972 because the stigma against vos declined, which is also reflected in a lower stigmatization of women’s speech. However, when taking these data as a whole, the preferred imperative shows a dominance of directive speech acts for vos. The higher usage in subordinate clauses could be taken as a tendency of the speakers to start with another term of address, such as usted or tú, and then move to vos as a technique to increase intensity in the scene.