

Navigating social dynamics through nominal terms of address in Colombian Spanish: A variational pragmatics approach

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This paper examines regional pragmatic variation in Colombia by analysing nominal terms of address in Barranquilla, a major urban centre on the Caribbean coast with distinct socio-cultural and linguistic traits. While previous studies on Colombian Spanish have largely focused on pronominal address forms, this study provides the first quantitative analysis of nominal terms of address, which have so far been explored only qualitatively (Flórez 1985). Through a variational pragmatics approach (Schneider and Barron 2009), this research investigates how macro-sociolinguistic variables—age, gender, and particularly estrato—and contextual variables of distance and power influence the use of nominal address terms in Barranquilla.

A key contribution of this study is its examination of estrato not only as a social but also as a geographical factor. In Colombia, estrato is a spatially structured classification system, in which dwellings are grouped into six socio-economic strata (estratos 1 to 6) based on their characteristics and location within the city (Chica-Olmo, Sánchez and Sepúlveda-Murillo 2020). In Barranquilla, this means that linguistic choices are shaped by both social stratification and urban spatial distribution, making estrato a geographically embedded variable. While speakers from lower estratos (1 and 2) predominantly use informal, kinship-based address terms (papi, mami) in intimate settings, those from higher estratos (5 and 6) favour formal titles (señor/a, doctor/a), particularly in professional and hierarchical contexts. These patterns illustrate how regional identity and local social ecologies influence pragmatic conventions.

The interplay between regional and social variation was analysed using a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative findings revealed age and gender-

based distinctions, with younger speakers and women favouring affectionate terms in informal interactions and older speakers preferring formal terms in hierarchical settings. A Chi-square analysis of data from 92 participants confirmed significant effects of estrato, age, gender, distance, and power on address choices ($p < 0.001$), with power (Cramér's $V = 0.19$) and distance (Cramér's $V = 0.10$) being the most influential factors.

The study also introduces the concept of frametisation to explain how these variables shape the conventionalization of specific address terms. In personal, close-knit interactions, informal terms become embedded within those social frames, while in professional or hierarchical contexts, formal titles such as señor/a and doctor/a are conventionalized, reflecting power dynamics at play. The findings demonstrate how speakers across all estratos and age groups adjust their language based on contextual factors such as power and social distance, highlighting the complex interplay between language, hierarchy, and regional context.

By combining qualitative insights with quantitative validation, this study advances the field of variational pragmatics by highlighting the interaction between regional variation and social stratification. It illustrates how multiple sociolinguistic factors—particularly estrato, age, and gender—intersect with contextual elements such as distance and power to shape linguistic behaviour. The findings highlight the importance of examining language use within its broader geographical and social context, demonstrating how communicative choices both reflect and reinforce the social stratification and power dynamics characteristic of a regional setting like Barranquilla.

References

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