

REVIEWS

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PATRICIA COVARRUBIAS, *Culture, communication, and cooperation: Interpersonal relations and pronominal address in a Mexican organization*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. Pp. xxiv, 161. Hb \$60.00.

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For those who find it useful to conceive of a language as a meaning-conveying instrument embedded in a cultural system, this brief, well-written treatment of pronominal address in Spanish will hold few surprises, but it will provide welcome and well-reasoned documentation of the major positions, supplemented by equally welcome expansions and elaborations of familiar points. Speakers of Spanish tend to address some interlocutors on some occasions using second-person verb forms, while addressing others, or the same on different occasions, using third-person forms, variably reinforcing the verbal morphology with the pronoun *tú* in the first cases and *usted* in the second. The author investigates alternative forms of what she calls “pronominal address” (irrespective of whether the pronoun is actually used), with data obtained from observations of workers at a construction company in Veracruz, Mexico, and from their own explanations of why they use one address form or the other. A good sample of the data is provided, presented in standard Spanish orthography with good, readable translations into English. For theoretical underpinning, the author offers the ethnography of speaking (Hymes 1962) and speech codes (Philipsen 1997).

From these vantage points, workers at the company, when using the two forms of address, are seen as enacting well-understood cultural norms embodied in meaningful relational alignments, while at the same time reflecting and confirming those norms; and they are also seen as activating two distinct, though some-

times overlapping, speech codes designated with the Spanish words *respeto* 'respect' and *confianza* 'trust, confidence'. The author is also guided by a concern with organizational structure and the ways that workers and managers use these forms to collaborate in making sense of the workplace and carrying out the activities of the company. This focus on the workplace, and on the lives of Mexican workers, is seen by the author as an important element of originality.

Following ideas from Brown & Gilman 1960, Covarrubias organizes relational alignments under the spatial metaphors of vertical and horizontal relationships, instantiated by *usted* and *tú* respectively. These two dimensions subsume such relationships as vertical Age Inequality and Gender-Based Inequality, and horizontal Age Parity and Organizational-Rank Parity. Under rubrics of this type, the author provides detailed and nuanced illustrations of *usted*- and *tú*-inducing relational alignments. Some interesting generalizations emerge – for example, age outweighs rank as a motivating factor, so that supervisors who are generally addressed as *usted* will get *tú* when they are close to the age of the worker addressing them (p. 38).

Spatial metaphors and the generalizations they make possible are shown to be insufficient to capture the social meanings instantiated by the two forms of address. In one of the better sections of the book, Covarrubias shows the necessity of postulating "inverted power alignments" as well as "provisional realignments." In the former, for example, female workers refuse offers by male supervisors to address them as *tú*, continuing to use *usted* as a way to fend off the advances that might be risked by acceptance of mutual *tú* treatment; or devout evangelical Christians insist on treating co-workers as *usted* as a way to signal that their faith calls them to remain separate (45, 48). Complementing inverted alignments, provisional realignments temporarily supersede the existing social norms. For example, a worker who normally treats a superior as *usted* will use *tú* when discussing a recipe for a favorite dish.

The solid descriptive aspects of the work are not matched by an explanatory apparatus as strong as readers might have expected. The labels of the different types of alignments are good as descriptors of the basis for the choice of pronominal form, and of the cultural norms they reflect and reinforce, and may even qualify as local explanations for each type of choice. Grouping these alignments under the rubrics "vertical" and "horizontal" adds some explanatory force, but not much, since verticalness and horizontalness are clearly implicit in the labels for each alignment, and since the number assigned (ten vertical, four horizontal) are an arbitrary taxonomic convenience. Like the names of the individual alignments, the labels "inverted" and "provisional" do provide some measure of explanation as far as they go. And one might agree that the author's terms are less susceptible than previously available constructs to the criticism of reductionism, or of not taking into account addressee effects or multiple meanings. But while some of these problems are ameliorated, and while the various terms of description bring order to an excellent array of data, it cannot be said that the work

represents a decisive explanatory jump forward beyond the already available theoretical terms (e.g., the dichotomies of T vs. V, familiar vs. formal, or power vs. solidarity).

In the most theoretically ambitious part of the book, Covarrubias overlays the notions of Code of *Respeto* and Code of *Confianza* on the theoretical apparatus initially provided by the four types of relational alignments. Uses of *usted* and *tú* respectively are said to be associated with these two speech codes, such that choice of address form activates a larger and deeper set of cultural meanings that dictate how one should live and relate to others. This is an attractive idea, but the author propounds it almost exclusively through assertion, stating simply that the codes exist, and that their existence is revealed by the reasons informants give for choosing address forms and the words they use in giving these reasons. We are led from these assertions to a treatment of all *usted* and *tú* usages as reflections of the two speech codes, which, supported only by the briefest argumentation, have now been elevated to the category of clearly established realities.

However, a persuasive presentation of a construct such as the Code of *Respeto*, and the claim that it becomes activated when *usted* forms are used, would require both a less assertive style and greater interest in substantiating hypotheses and subjecting them to falsification. If one desists from the receptive reading that can make this volume useful and informative, and moves instead to a mode that is more attuned to the importance of evidentiary standards, the value of the work tends to diminish with respect not only to speech codes but to other aspects of the presentation as well.

The study relies heavily on the respondents' own accounts of why they choose one or the other form. This may be a reasonable approach, but it leads, for example, to the rejection of the construct of "solidarity," on the grounds that none of the respondents ever used the term. If the scholar's work is to consist in part of recording the folk analyses proposed by informants, however, then one wonders whether it is true that the constructs that are adopted, such as vertical, horizontal, inverted, and provisional alignments, meet the test of being part of the respondents' untutored vocabulary. These Mexican workers say a lot about why they choose address forms, but the evidence is weak that they refer directly to "inversion of roles" or "verticality of relations," and one doubts that these terms are any more natural than the rejected "solidarity." Similarly, it is true that the respondents are at home with the notions of *respeto* and *confianza*, but they do not directly articulate the existence of the *respeto* and *confianza* speech codes, which are abstractions that would require much more theoretical and empirical grounding than is offered here.

In a similar vein, one is struck by the author's apparent lack of interest in confronting her hypotheses with potentially falsifying items. The ninth vertical relational alignment, the Gender-Based one, calls for *usted* to be used for women, as many informants recount, so as to show respect and avoid misunderstandings regarding intent. In contrast, the first two horizontal alignments – Age Parity and

Organizational Rank Parity – call for workers of the same age and rank to use *tú* with one another. If these notions are intended as explanations of observed usage or of the descriptions made by respondents, obvious empirical problems arise, for the analysis now permits men at the factory to address a woman of equal rank as *usted* under the vertical Gender-Based alignment, and also as *tú* under the horizontal Age Parity alignment. The only way to know which of these alignments is being enacted is by the choice of address form, a choice which in turn is explained by the alignment.

My point is not to hurl facile charges of circularity, since it is perfectly reasonable to maintain that, when external or referential circumstances allow for alternative alignments (addressee is a woman, addressee is of equal rank), speakers will choose address forms depending on which alignment they want to enact. However, the lack of attention to the analytical issues (especially falsifiability) that these situations bring up is one of the serious limitations of the work.

Moreover, little is gained by urging on one's colleagues theoretical or methodological paths not chosen, but throughout this book one is struck by the use of the notion of "likelihood" coupled with the absence of using even simple counts or statistics. According to the respondents, marriage and parenthood earn members heightened status, and so married women, especially mothers, are "more likely" to receive *usted* regardless of age (44). But in the absence of some quantitative evidence, the reader is left wondering what "more likely" means, and whether there is a claim here that a visit to the factory will not reveal any young male workers using *tú* with women of equal organizational rank, even if they are married and have children. This lack of interest in the rigors of falsifiability leads Covarrubias into contradictions. If age outweighs rank as a relational alignment that motivates the choice of address form, the reader will want to know why age does not outweigh marriage. Does the author really intend to say that age outweighs rank but that marriage outweighs age? And what method would be pursued, and what evidence adduced, to establish such orderings of alignments and their connection with choices of address form?

These theoretical shortcomings aside, the work is a commendable piece of descriptive field work, and scholars interested in Spanish, in address forms, in ethnographies of speaking, and in the instantiation of speech codes will find it rewarding reading.

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