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USTED WITHOUT *USTED:*

ENCODING AND DECODING INTENT IN MEXICAN SPANISH

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ABSTRACT
In pro-drop varieties like Mexican Spanish, the omission of overt pronominal honorifics (pronominal address forms) and the presence of social deixis present a cognitive puzzle: how is the intention of (in-) formal attitude retrieved from the remaining grammar? Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and extrapolating from Schmitt et al.'s (1999) *lemma access model*, this small exploratory study investigates how *relative power* and *social distance i*nteract with the remaining morphosyntax when primary markers of respect (*T/V forms*) are omitted. By examining verbal agreement, object clitics, possessives, and reflexives, I explore how social information is maintained across these secondary grammatical categories. Data from native consultant evaluations reveal a recurrent singular/plural asymmetry. In the singular, binary morphological contrasts (*tú/usted*) signal the address intent clearly. Conversely, in the plural (*ustedes*), there is a collapse into morphological neutralisation, creating referential ambiguity. These findings suggest that plural expressions of *courtesy and trust* require extra-linguistic information and pragmatic inference for disambiguation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Addressing others within social hierarchies requires languages to provide grammatical tools to signal politeness. While the universal need for politeness is expressed through sociocultural strategies of *communicative altruism* (Leech, 2014, pp. 3–7) employed to show respect, the diverse linguistic systems encoding politeness are broadly referred to as *honorifics* (McCready, 2019, pp. 2, 105). At a pronominal level, honorifics are commonly referred to as pronominal forms of address, further defined as forms of *trust and courtesy* [1] (Jeppesen Kragh & Strudsholm, 2023). In Standard Modern English (SME), these forms remain neutral in signalling social status after the loss of the archaic pronoun *thou*, and speakers now possess only the socially ambiguous *you*. This functions as both the *form of trust* (used in familiar situations) and the form of courtesy (used in formal situations). To acknowledge social status differences in communication, SME forces a reliance on social titles (e.g., *Dr., Ms., Sir*) and/or formal lexical register. Consequently, an English

listener cannot determine if they are addressed with courtesy or trust from pronouns alone (Jeppesen Kragh & Strudsholm, 2023).

Some languages (e.g., Japanese, Thai) have complex strategies for signalling status difference, while other languages (e.g., French, Modern Greek, Russian, Spanish) rely on streamlined strategies, marking a distinction between familiar and formal address (McCready, 2019, p. 106). Specifically, this is marked pronominally in the second person, creating a specific *honorific strategy* (McCready, 2019, pp. 59, 105) responsible for inducing inferences about the relationship between the discourse participants and the formality of a context. This strategy involves *T/V systems* (formal: 'V' (Latin *vos*), familiar/informal: 'T'(Latin *tu*)) (Brown & Gilman, 1960).

Although honorific strategies differ cross-linguistically, there are also cross-varietal differences. Consider Spanish, which features high variation in personal-pronoun use, particularly its T/V forms. Across its many varieties, Spanish employs a set of second-person pronouns, including *tú, vos, usted* in the singular, and *vosotros* and *ustedes* in the plural. The distribution of these forms is highly regional; for instance, *vos* and *vosotros* are restricted to specific dialects (*vos* in Argentina, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Antioquia, Colombia; *vosotros* in Spain). Additionally, such forms feature clear morphosyntactic distinctions. Trust (*tú*) and courtesy singular forms (*usted*) are distinguished through a unique structural mismatch, symptomatic of *social deixis*, where *usted* behaves grammatically as a third-person form (*él/ella*) despite its second-person reference (Serrano, 2023). Such structural features provide the framework for regional variation in pronoun choice.

Mexican Spanish (henceforth MexSp) serves as a primary example of this variation. While it shares the singular *tú–usted* contrast with Peninsular Spanish (henceforth PenSp), it is characterised by the total absence of the familiar plural *vosotros* (Aguilar-Sánchez, 2018). Therefore, *ustedes* remains the sole trust–courtesy form for addressing groups. In this Spanish variety, honorific strategies are also influenced by pro-drop, as speakers frequently drop the pronouns entirely and rely on the remaining morphosyntax, where person and number features are present. However, if the pronouns are uttered, this choice serves marked discourse purposes. Consider (1):

(1) Trabaj-a mucho últimamente.
work-PRES.3SG.FOR [2] much lately
"You have been working a lot lately." (formal)
"He/she has been working a lot lately."

Here, the lexical item *usted* (the singular formal *you*) is absent. Yet, the listener must retrieve the courtesy intent solely from the third-person verb morphology (*-a*) agreeing with the elided *usted*. This process raises some fundamental questions: when the pronoun is dropped, is the courtesy encoded purely morphosyntactically? Since the suffix *-a*, also used for third person, makes the verb form *trabaja* ambiguous, does the listener need to use context to infer the speaker's courtesy intent?

MexSp is a variety where such questions can be explored in a more streamlined way. Unlike singular ternary systems present in the Colombian variety (*tú, vos, usted*) or plural binary ones present in PenSp (*ustedes, vosotros*), MexSp offers a binary contrast in the singular forms and a neutralised plural form. This comparatively streamlined system, combined with a high frequency of pro-drop, provides a clear environment for analysing how social meaning is processed when the referential pronoun is absent.

Nevertheless, the study of pronominal honorifics remains a site of significant theoretical tension, primarily because pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and lexicalist models insufficiently address mismatches between morphosyntax and pragmatic intent. Pragmatists emphasise a speaker's intent to use a courtesy form to show respect, alongside the inferential process a listener uses to decode this intent based on context. Sociolinguists argue certain cues in the environment (e.g., an interlocutor's age or attire) signal the appropriate form to both produce and expect to hear. Meanwhile, lexicalists using the lemma model argue

that all morphosyntactic agreement requires a feature on the lemma, yet they have historically focused only on phi-features ([person], [number], [gender]), largely ignoring whether social status may be similarly encoded as a grammatical instruction.

To investigate these theoretical tensions, I present an exploratory analysis based on data from a native MexSp consultant. Using an integrative approach, I analyse how this empirical data aligns with the different theoretical angles discussed above. I specifically test a range of grammatical categories (verb agreement, clitics, reflexives, and possessives) in plural and singular. To understand how this information is processed, I use a two-stage elicitation process to evaluate whether courtesy meaning can be retrieved from morphosyntactic cues alone versus within specific social scenarios. By examining this interaction, this paper asks:

1. To what extent does the interpretation of courtesy/trust intent rely on social scenarios when the pronoun is omitted?
2. Can dependent grammatical elements (verb agreement, clitics, possessives and reflexives) successfully encode and transmit these social features in isolation?

In this paper, I first establish a theoretical background of social deixis and pro-drop, alongside several approaches used to study their production and processing (Section 2). An overview of the data collection methods and dataset is then provided (Section 3), followed by an empirical analysis of each grammatical category (Section 4, sub-sections 4.1–4.4). Finally, Section 5 synthesises the results to tentatively propose a plausible hypothesis for resolving address-intent ambiguity within the established theoretical frameworks.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

At its core, the choice of a specific address form is a pragmatic act of social deixis: using language to locate the speaker and listener within a social hierarchy. Historically, the study of pronominal address forms has prioritised the sociolinguistic distribution of pronouns, determining when and why speakers select a specific form. Early work on the study of address established the *power and solidarity* framework, linking pronoun choice to social hierarchy in T/V systems (Brown & Gilman, 1960). Later, this foundation allowed Brown and Levinson (1987) to operationalise the power and solidarity axes into a *universal politeness theory*. They argue that pronoun choice is determined by three sociological factors: the *relative power* (P) of a listener over a speaker, the *social distance* (D) between them, and the *ranking of imposition* (R) of the speech act itself (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 74–76). While P describes social hierarchies, D describes degrees of familiarity. For instance, a manager has [+P] over an employee, but [0P] when speaking to a peer. [+D] indicates strangers, while [–D] indicates intimates. Asking someone the time is [–R], while requesting to borrow money is [+R].

While these variables provide a universal calculus of politeness (where W = D + P + R is the total weight of a social interaction), leading to certain pronoun choices, their specific linguistic realisation is culture-dependent (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 76). For MexSp, Jaramillo (1996) examined how these choices are negotiated within the family, discovering that age and generational rank function as primary determinants of P, requiring formal reference to the addressee. Importantly, the realisation of P in Mexico does not always align with European norms, where family intimacy typically neutralises formality ([0P, –D]). Brown (1975) found that the singular form of courtesy is frequently used to address grandparents, contrasting significantly with PenSp norms, further supporting the idea that, in MexSp, courtesy usage is also embedded in non-professional, family hierarchies.

However, linguistic challenges arise when these social hierarchies must be communicated without the use of an explicit pronoun, where morphosyntactic politeness markers can be ambiguous. This distinction between social intent and linguistic realisation is further supported by recent pragmatics research. While English often relies on lexical strategies to negotiate these hierarchies, Romance languages encode courtesy

morphosyntactically. Salazar-Campillo (2023) argues that this reflects a *structural spread*, where address marking extends beyond the pronoun to other features like verb forms and clitic placement. This spread is particularly crucial for pro-drop varieties. Salvador et al. (2022) found that the omission of the pronoun itself carries consistent social meaning. They observed that because overt courtesy/trust forms are less used in natural speech, the speaker must rely entirely on verb morphology, clitics, reflexives, or possessives to transmit the address intent. This suggests that pronoun elision is not a loss of meaning but a shift in where that meaning is stored.

While this paper does not explicitly test the cognitive process of the lexical access of pronominal address forms in pro-drop contexts, I suggest this structural spread, if further tested experimentally, may broaden our understanding of whether formality is encoded as a persistent feature within the mental lexicon, specifically on the lemma for the second person. This speculative claim extrapolates from Schmitt et al.'s (1999) proposal that, if a grammatical feature is retrieved at the lexical level, it should remain active across subsequent morphosyntactic encoding even if the pronoun itself is suppressed.

Despite this structural evidence, a gap remains in linking these sociolinguistic norms (Jaramillo, 1996; Brown, 1975) with their pragmatic realisation (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and the potential underlying cognitive mechanisms of lemma access for production (Schmitt et al., 1999). This study addresses this gap by analysing four grammatical categories (verbal agreement, clitics, reflexives, possessives) across scenarios of varying power and distance inspired by Jaramillo's (1996) and Brown's (1975) findings. By employing these elements in my paper, I investigate the extent to which morphological markers can independently transmit clear address intent and how social contexts resolve address-intent ambiguity.

3. METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from one native speaker of MexSp acting as a linguistic consultant, who evaluated short sentences. The dataset consisted of minimal pairs contrasting overt (pronoun expressed) and non-overt (pronoun omitted) courtesy/trust forms, systematically varied across four grammatical categories to test the structural spread identified by Salazar-Campillo (2023):

1. **Verbal Agreement:** variation in verb morphology (e.g., *trabaj-as* vs. *trabaj-a*).
2. **Clitic Choice:** direct object pronouns (e.g., *te* vs. *lo/la*).
3. **Reflexives:** self-referential constructions (e.g., *te ves* vs. *se ve*).
4. **Possessives:** possessive determiners (e.g., *tu* vs. *su*).

To explore the role of sociopragmatic cues in pronominal selection, each structure was tested across four specific social contexts, designed to loosely operationalise variables P and D. It is important to clarify that these scenarios are intended to reflect realistic contexts within Mexican society, rather than strictly controlled experimental settings. As such, the formal interpretation may result from a combination of social cues, reflecting the multi-causal nature of sociolinguistic processing (Aguilar-Sánchez, 2018).

Scenario 1: peer intimacy [0P, –D] [3] (e.g., friend-to-friend interactions).
Scenario 2: generational hierarchy [+P, –D] (e.g., grandchild-to-grandparent interactions).
Scenario 3: professional hierarchy [0P, +D] (e.g., boss-to-employee interactions).
Scenario 4: institutional deference [+P, +D] (e.g., receptionists addressing clients, nurses addressing patients; this scenario covers professional distance with a lower-power position from the speaker in a context of care).

The elicitation proceeded in two stages to distinguish between grammatical encoding and pragmatic inference:

1. **In isolation:** the consultant evaluated using a gradient scale the naturalness of each sentence *without* a specific pragmatic context (acceptable (✓), marginal (?), unacceptable (*)).
2. **Within social scenarios:** the consultant evaluated only the acceptable sentences identified in the first stage, now embedded within the specific social scenarios defined above.

In total, the dataset consisted of 84 items, created by considering the following matrix, visible in Table 1:

Table 1
Variables used in creating the dataset

Variable	you.SG.FAM	you.SG.FOR		you.PL	
Verbal agreement	–2SG.FAM (*-as*)	–3SG.FOR (*-a*)		–3PL (*-an*)	
Clitics	CL.2SG.FAM (*te*)	CL3SG.F.FOR (*la*)	CL.3SG.M.FOR (*lo*)	CL.3PL.F (*las*)	CL.3PL.M (*los*)
Reflexives	REFL.2SG.FAM (*te*)	REFL.3SG.FOR (*se*)		REFL.3PL (*se*)	
Possessives	POSS.2SG.FAM (*tu*)	POSS.3SG.FOR (*su*)		POSS.3PL (*sus*)	

Note. Where no FAM- or FOR-glosses (which stand for *familiar* and *formal*) are given, the distinction is neutralised.

This matrix results in 14 base items. To match overt and non-overt conditions, this number was doubled, resulting in 28 items for Block 1, specifically designed to map the morphosyntactic behaviour of the variables in isolation. In Block 2, the 14 base items (non-overt forms only) were also used across the 4 social scenarios, resulting in 56 items. The consultant completed the task in one 45-minute session.

4. RESULTS

Results from Block 1 indicate that while overt pronoun use is fully grammatical with verbal agreement (Variable 1), it is pragmatically marked and generally avoided, as visible in examples (2, 3), organised in Table 2 below (which, for illustrative purposes, contains only trust form judgements embedded within Scenario 1). Contrastively, the inclusion of overt pronouns in clitic, reflexive, and possessive constructions was consistently judged as redundant and ungrammatical, as visible in sentences (4, 6, 8) from Table 2. In Block 2, only the items featuring non-overt courtesy and trust forms were judged as natural in the tested social scenarios.
In the following subsections, I will present the specific findings for each grammatical element (variable) to demonstrate how a MexSp speaker utilises morphosyntax to encode and decode social distance in the singular, while relying on inferences in the plural.

4.1 Verbal agreement

The analysis of verbal agreement reveals an asymmetry reflective of social deixis: courtesy is morphologically overt in the singular but neutralised in the plural. As shown in the examples below (10, 11), singular verbal morphology acts as a direct grammatical marker of courtesy, implicitly agreeing with the elided pronoun.

(10) friend to friend ([0P, –D], trust)
Trabaj-as mucho últimamente.
work-PRES.2SG.FAM much lately
"You have been working a lot lately."

(11) nephew to grandparent ([+P, –D], courtesy)
Trabaj-a mucho últimamente.
work-PRES.3SG.FOR much lately
"You have been working a lot lately."

Table 2

Examples (2)–(9): Comparison of overt (marginal) vs. non-overt (natural) forms

Variable	Overt form (marginal)	Non-overt Form (natural)
S-V agreement	(2) *Friend-to-friend* **? Tú** **trabaj-as** mucho. you.2SG.FAM work-2SG much	(3) *Friend-to-friend* ✓**Trabaj-as** mucho. work-2SG.FAM much "You work a lot."
Clitics	(4) *Friend-to-friend* *** Tú** **te** **vi** ayer. you.2SG.FAM CL.2SG.FAM saw.1SG yesterday	(5) *Friend-to-friend* ✓**Te** **vi** ayer. CL.2SG.FAM saw.1SG yesterday "I saw you yesterday."
Possessives	(6) *Friend-to-friend* *** Tú** **tienes tu** abrigo. you.2SG.FAM have POSS.2SG.FAM coat	(7) *Friend-to-friend* ✓**Tienes tu** chamarra. have POSS.2SG.FAM jacket "Here's your jacket."
Reflexives	(8) Friend-to-friend *** Tú** **te** **ves** cansado. you.2SG.FAM REFL.2SG.FAM look tired	(9) Friend-to-friend ✓**Te** **ves** cansado. REFL.2SG.FAM look tired "You look tired."

Note. (?) indicates marginality, (*) indicates ungrammaticality, (✓) indicates naturalness.

Here, the distinction is unambiguous. The suffix *-as* is intrinsically linked to familiar address (*tú*), while the suffix *-a* signals formality (*usted*). Although both sentences semantically address a second person, (11) requires third-person morphology. This mismatch, using third-person morphology to refer to a second person, is what the listener decodes as address intent in these specific scenarios. The consultant instantly identified the intent of (10) and (11) in isolation, confirming that verbal agreement morphology alone successfully handles the trust–courtesy disambiguation. In contrast, plural morphology is neutral in handling disambiguation. As seen in (12) and (13), the suffix *-an* corresponds to the plural *ustedes*, covering both trust and courtesy address.

(12) boss to a group of employees ([0P, +D], courtesy)
Trabaj-an mucho últimamente.
work-3PL.FOR much lately
"You all have been working a lot lately."

(13) friend to friend group ([0P, –D], trust)
Trabaj-an mucho últimamente.
work-3PL.FAM much lately
"You all have been working a lot lately."

Presented with these sentences in isolation, the consultant could not determine the intended level of address. Unlike the singular examples, where morphology provided necessary information for disambiguation, the plural examples required her to ask for the social context to clarify the intended attitude. She described this neutrality as a *socially safe strategy*, relieving the speaker of the burden of calculating status distance. While the singular requires morphological specification, the plural relies entirely on pragmatic inference to resolve the address-intent ambiguity.

4.2 Clitics

Singular clitics also preserve a sharp trust–courtesy distinction, whereas plural clitics neutralise it. In singular constructions, the choice of object clitic is sufficient to identify the intended attitude. As exemplified in (14, 15), *te* marks trust (14), while *lo/la* forms mark courtesy (15). [4]

(14) friend to friend ([0P, –D], trust)
Te vi ayer.
CL.2SG.FAM saw.1SG yesterday
"I saw you yesterday."

(15) nephew to grandfather ([+P, –D], courtesy)
Lo vi ayer.
CL.3SG.M.FOR saw.1SG yesterday
"I saw you yesterday."

The consultant reported no ambiguity in these forms: *te* (14) was immediately identified as addressing a friend, while *lo* (15) signalled generational hierarchy. Because overt pronouns are elided, the lemma features of *usted* (third person, singular) are remapped entirely onto the clitic *lo/la*. However, in the plural, morphology stops generating social distinctions, leaving the clitics (*los/las*) underspecified. Consider sentences (16, 17):

(16) boss to a group of male employees ([0P, +D], courtesy)
Los vi ayer.
CL.3PL.M.FOR saw.1SG yesterday
"I saw you all yesterday."

(17) friend to a male friend group ([0P, –D], trust)
Los vi ayer.
CL.3PL.M.FAM saw.1SG yesterday
"I saw you all yesterday."

Here, the forms *los/las* remain identical whether addressing subordinates or peers and only have gender distinctions. Without any social context, the consultant could not determine the courtesy-trust intent. In the plural, the clitic ceases to function as a social marker and becomes only a referential tool, forcing the listener to infer the intent from the context.

4.3 Possessive determiners

Possessive determiners behave similarly. Singular constructions (*tu/su*) act as markers of trust or courtesy, as illustrated in sentences (18, 19):

(18) friend to friend ([0P, –D], trust)

Tien-es	tu	chamarra	aquí.
have-PRES.2SG.FAM	POSS.2SG.FAM	jacket	here

"Here's your jacket."

(19) receptionist to client ([+P, +D], courtesy)

Tien-e	su	abrigo	aquí.
have-PRES.3SG.FOR	POSS.3SG.FOR	coat	here

"Here's your coat."

The consultant immediately distinguished the attitude in (18) as familiar and (19) as professional. Importantly, these examples introduce a lexical variable: *chamarra* (glossed as jacket, informal term) vs. *abrigo* (glossed as coat, formal term). While semantically similar, the consultant noted that these terms carry distinct sociolinguistic registers. Specifically, *chamarra* was judged as stylistically incongruent in formal contexts, suggesting it is an informal lexical item clashing with the courtesy-indicating morphosyntax.
Consistent with previous grammatical elements, this grammatical distinction collapses in the plural, as outlined in sentences (20, 21):

(20) receptionist to clients ([+P, +D], courtesy)

Tien-en	sus	abrigos	aquí.
have-PRES.3PL.FOR	POSS.3PL.FOR	coats	here

"Here are your coats."

(21) friend to a friend group ([0P, –D], trust)

Tien-en	sus	chamarras	aquí.
have-PRES.3PL.FAM	POSS.3PL.FAM	jackets	here

"Here are your jackets."

Across (20) and (21), the possessive sus is identical. Unlike the singular, where the *tu/su* distinction is indicative of courtesy, the plural sus is neutralised. Additionally, social meaning is not located in a single morphological code (e.g., the singular *su*), but is instead distributed across the lexicon (e.g., noun choices such as abrigo) and the pragmatic context. This better mirrors how real-life conversations work, where multiple indicators of address intent co-exist.

4.4 Reflexive markers

Reflexive markers also provide similar evidence. In the singular, the contrast between the reflexive markers *te* and *se* clearly distinguishes the social relationship without the need for overt pronouns. Consider sentences (22, 23):

(22) friend to male friend ([0P, –D], trust)

Te	ve-s	cansad-o.
REFL.2SG.FAM	look-PRES.2SG.FAM	tired-M.SG

"You look tired."

(23) nurse to patient ([+P, +D], courtesy)

Se	ve	cansad-o.
REFL.3SG.FOR	look-PRES.3SG.FOR	tired-M.SG

"You look tired."

The consultant judged *te ves* (22) as intimate, while *se ve* (23) immediately signalled professional distance. Consistent with the other domains, this distinction collapses in the plural (sentences 24, 25):

(24) nurse to a patient's parents ([+P, +D], courtesy)

Se	ve-n	cansad-os.
REFL.3PL.FOR	look-PRES.3PL.FOR	tired-PL

"You (all) look tired."

(25) friend to a male friend group ([0P, –D], trust)

Se	ve-n	cansad-os.
REFL.3PL.FAM	look-PRES.3PL.FAM	tired-PL

"You (all) look tired."

Here, the form *se ven* is interpreted as ambiguous, in which the morphology does not specify address intent but merely indicates plural address.

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis of verbal agreement, clitics, possessives and reflexive markers reveal an asymmetry in the expression of social deixis within this dataset. While singular forms in MexSp appear to encode address intent directly through morphology, avoiding ambiguity, plural forms neutralise this distinction, leaving interpretation and disambiguation to extra-linguistic inference.

The data suggest that a grammatical signal of courtesy is contingent upon the existence of a binary choice (Saussure, 1916/1971, p. 189). Namely, in the singular, the speaker chooses between *tú* ([–courtesy]) and *usted* ([+courtesy]) where the selection of a form (e.g., the suffix *-as*, clitic *te*, or possessive *tu*) negates the other, creating an unambiguous social signal. However, because MexSp lacks the familiar plural *vosotros* found in PenSp, the form *ustedes* must absorb both trust and courtesy functions. Following structuralist principles, where no contrastive choice exists, no grammatical signal can be generated (Saussure, 1916/1971, p. 194). Consequently, in the plural, the listener must look outward to extra-linguistic context, such as the sociolinguistic factors proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), to resolve the inherent ambiguity.

Such findings encourage the speculation of a potential hypothesis for the encoding and decoding (as cognitive processes) of address intent in this pro-drop variety that remains open to experimental testing. Specifically, I tentatively propose that the social variables P and D (Brown & Levinson, 1987) might function as conceptual triggers capable of activating the abstract lemma for *usted* or *ustedes* within the mental lexicon.

Under this hypothesis, following the model proposed by Schmitt et al. (1999), the proposed explanation would be that such lemma activation leads to the suppression of the overt pronoun (via a specific gating mechanism), while its phi-features remain visible in the dependent morphosyntax. Further, in the singular, this visible morphosyntax perhaps generates a grammatical instruction of respect, which the immediate social context then filters or licenses based on the perceived reality of the relationship. To exemplify this hypothesis, the male singular clitic *lo* generates the instruction*: I am showing respect to a male addressee*, after which the pragmatic context evaluates the social reality (*Is the listener my superior?*). As such, if the social reality matches the morphological instruction, the utterance is licensed as natural. Conversely, in the plural, the morphological neutralisation of *ustedes* may prevent these features from reaching the surface grammar, leaving this filtering/licensing without a morphological signal to evaluate. Consequently, the listener must look entirely outward to context to correctly retrieve the intended level of respect from extra-linguistic information. Whether this speculative hypothesis and its proposed explanation hold is, however, contingent on broader empirical coverage – something this paper hopes to encourage.

Nevertheless, such findings face limitations that define this paper as an exploratory investigation. As a junior researcher conducting a small-scale consultancy study, my dataset was not constructed within a strictly controlled experimental environment, but rather through a qualitative lens. The operationalisation of P and D was based on my subjective judgements and intentionally included cultural nuances specific to Mexican society, such as generational respect within the family (which are also subject to my interpretations). Generalisations therefore cannot be made across demographics, groups, contexts, and regional variations of MexSp. Additionally, the ranking of imposition variable was not considered at all, which may have affected both the data and its interpretation.

Furthermore, the study does not explicitly address the address-intent ambiguity inherent in third-person morphology. Because *usted* shares the same verbal agreement with third-person pronouns, the grammar alone remains underspecified in mixed environments where both an addressee and a third-party subject are present. In such scenarios, even singular morphology might prove less decisive than hypothesised, forcing the listener to rely on the same pragmatic negotiation found in the plural. Nevertheless, multimodal cues (gaze, interaction) would be available in such contexts, which is important to note, as the matter of disambiguation cannot be solely solved from language.

Lastly, the speculative hypothesis proposed here, which seeks to synthesise pragmatic intent, sociocultural cues, and the psycholinguistic model of lemma access, should be carefully tested through experimental methodologies. Future research must look beyond adult speakers' intuitions and investigate the acquisitional trajectory of pronominal address forms in children. Observing how MexSp-speaking children learn to disambiguate formal reference, and the specific errors they make during this process, would provide evidence for how encoding, production and decoding functions are linked to social cognition.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates that social deixis in MexSp functions at a sophisticated interface where courtesy is a distributed property. The data from this exploratory study indicate that overt pronouns are often pragmatically marked, as referential formality is efficiently maintained through non-overt (pro-drop) morphological markers in singular verbal agreement, clitics, and reflexives. While singular morphosyntax was found to provide an unambiguous signal of respect, the plural system remains neutralised and relies on extra-linguistic factors for disambiguation.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND DECLARATIONS

Funding statement: No funding was received in the realisation of this research article.

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Ethical approval: No ethical approval was obtained from the FEtC-H. However, the Faculty's guidelines for student research were adhered to at all times, and informed consent was obtained from the consultant prior to participation.

FOOTNOTES

1. Throughout this paper, I use the terms **pronominal address forms, pronominal forms of address, pronominal honorifics, forms of trust and courtesy, courtesy/trust forms** interchangeably to refer to the second-person pronouns *tú, usted, ustedes* and their related verb morphology, which speakers of Mexican Spanish deploy to index social relationships along axes of familiarity (trust) and deference (courtesy). Where relevant, I distinguish between the *familiar* register (associated with *tú*) and the *formal* deferential (professional) register (associated with *usted/ustedes*). The phrase **forms of courtesy/trust**, used at points in this text, reflects this dual indexical function and should be understood as shorthand for the full familiar-formal continuum. Additionally, in this paper, *trust* (= informal/familiar), while *courtesy* = formal).

2. Due to deixis, this glossing choice highlights the grammatical behaviour (third person) of the elided (non-overt) pronoun, and not the semantic one (second person).

3. Variable P does not have a [–] value, as it is directional (from speaker to listener), hence the [0P] and [+P] notations. This way, the model can represent equal status, and power surplus held by the speaker, respectively.

4. For illustrative purposes, whenever there is a masculine-feminine distinction, only the masculine variant will be provided, since it does not affect the address-intent interpretation.

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