

## SU MERCED IS GROWING OLD

Hugo R. Albor A.

UNIVERSIDAD PEDAGÓGICA NACIONAL

**Resumen:** Este artículo estudia el uso de *su mercé* en Colombia, una forma antigua de tratamiento que se mantiene en otros países de Hispanoamérica. Muestra las áreas geográficas en donde se usa hoy y su 'status' social.

**Resumo:** Este artigo estudia o uso de *su mercé* en Colombia, unha forma antiga de tratamento que se mantén noutros países de Hispanoamérica. Mostra as áreas xeográficas nas que se emprega hoxe e o seu estatuto social.

**Abstract:** This article studies the use and usage of *su mercé* in Colombia, an old address form which also remains in other Hispanic-American countries. It shows the geographical areas where it is used today and its social status.

Regarding *su merced*, a polite and respectful address form, Ch. Kany writes that "Children, especially in the country, often address their parents with the respectful usted + a third person singular verb, and in certain limited rural sections even with *su merced*, a form applied also to other persons of respect and superior social standing!". He also says, "In Colombia *su merced*, is also used affectionately by parents to children and vice versa, between husband and wife, and among intimate friends!". Although Kany's contribution in this respect is valuable for the study of the Spanish-American dialects, it requires some sort of precision as to set off the Colombian geographical areas where *su merced* is used and as to determine its social status. L. Florez does not go further by stating, "Su merced (pronunciado *sumercé*) es tratamiento de respeto que dan al superior los campesinos de algunos departamentos del interior de Colombia. En Bogotá es también

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<sup>1</sup> Charles E. Kany, *American-Spanish Syntax*, 2nd. edition, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Charles E. Kany, *Op. cit.*, p. 94.

vocativo cariñoso entre todos los miembros de la familia<sup>3</sup>". In the Colombian novels we consulted, *su merced* takes the form *su mercé*, two words, in *Los Clavijos*, and it appears like this only once in *Siervo sin tierra* (asterisked in this paper).

In the other ones it is printed *sumercé*, which is a reflection of the oral form [sumersé]; *sus mercedes* remains *sus mercedes*, which is pronounced [sùsmersédes]<sup>4</sup>".

Looking at and over the Colombian narrative – novels, short stories, jokes– and observing the speech and the linguistic behaviour of the speakers of the Colombian sierras, we notice that *sumercé* and *sus mercedes* are actually used in the Departments of Norte de Santander and Santander, the southern part of El Cesar (an isogloss may be drawn on El Cesar and Santander border), the eastern part of Antioquia, the Cundinamarca-Boyacá Plateau (another isogloss may be traced on the Boyacá and the Llanos de Casanare border), Caldas, Risaralda, Quindío, the Tolima sierras, Huila, the eastern part of Cauca, the western part of Nariño, Putumayo, as well as in certain parts of Ecuador bordering on Colombia. This is to say that these address forms are registered in the Cordillera Central and the Cordillera Oriental.

If we bear in mind that the Spanish of the highlands is conservative due in part to the late settlements, to the poor education of most of their inhabitants, and the lack of access of these people to modern means of transportation and communication, we are tempted to assert that these address forms are now perhaps more often used in rural areas and towns than in the big cities. They are found in the speech of people with formal education and those without it, among friends of the same social status, between husband and wife, and affectionately by parents to

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<sup>3</sup> Luis Florez, "El español hablado en Colombia y su atlas lingüístico", *Thesaurus*, Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo, tomo XVIII, Bogotá, 1963, p. 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Juan Alvarez G., *Los Clavijos*, Pasto, Imprenta Departamental, 1964. Eduardo Caballero C.; *Siervo sin tierra*, Medellín, Editorial Bedout, 1963.—, *El Cristo de espaldas*, Medellín, Editorial Bedout, 1964. José E. Rivera, *La vorágine*, Bogotá, Ediciones Emfasar, s. f..

children and vice versa. They imply anger or endearment, empathy or amenity, respect or friendliness, depending on the situation.

From *La Vorágine*, which takes place in the rubber plantations of the selva (forest of Casanare and Amazonas), and whose protagonists and other characters come from many parts of Colombia and even from abroad, the examples below has been brought out. El Pipa, an uncivilized and cruel fellow, is the one and only who uses *sumercé* and *sus mercedes* all along the novel. He works as an errand boy for his godfather.

[El Pipa to Cova]: "–Si, sumercé – y terciándose la ruana me alargó un papel enrollado" .," (Rivera, p. 12) .

[El Pipa to Cova and Alicia]: "–¿No son, pues, sus mercedes los que estuvieron en el trapiche?". (Cited by Kany, Loc. cit.).

[El Pipa to Cova and Alicia]: "–Yo creí –balbuceó– que eran sus mercedes los acuñadores de moneda". (Rivera, p. 12).

[El Pipa to Cova]: "–Sumercé firme la notificación para que mi padrino vea que cumplí. Firme como Intendente". "Ojalá sumercé me ayude, si es cierto que va de empleado", (Rivera, p. 13).

[El Pipa to Cova and Alicia]: "–.Aquí, donde sus mercedes me ven, este sombrero tiene más de dos años, y lo saqué de Casanare". (Rivera, p. 13).

In Bogotá *sumercé* is extant, but it is not any more the vocative of endearment used among all the family members. In the market place, vendors, who are from Bogotá or from other parts of the country, and who belong to middle class society and who usually have a poor education, use *sumercé* and *sus mercedes* in addressing their actual or potential customers. (In order to attract customers and in order to have a short talk with them, vendors also use, don 'sir', amor 'dear', mono 'blond'; doña 'lady', 'madam', mona 'blondie'). "*Sumercé*\_no se moleste. Usté sabe que la comida 'victuals' está cara. Tome, *sumercé*, las vueltas. Que vuelva". On a buseta 'a small bus' a female passenger of about forty or fifty years of age asks her unknown neighbour, "¿Sumercé, tiene horas?". Many a time passengers-to-be at the door of a buseta, usually young people, address the driver using either the familiar *tu* or the

respectful *usted* [usté]. In a supermarket or in a small shop, attendants may address their customers with *tu*, which is taken by some middle age people and by old Bogotianians as "something of 'mal gusto' and lacking in respect". Among university students the familiar *tu* is the frequent form of address; they use *usté* to address their teachers. Among the high class and the upper middle class, among business men and executives, *sumercé* and *sus mercedes* are definitely giving way to the use of *tu* and *usté*, which may appear in the same linguistic interchange. If you are doing business with someone you just have met, this person will address you with *don* followed by the given name and with *usté*. In a both familiar and formal conversation" do not be surprised if your in-laws address you with *don* + given name and with *usté*. As it has been suggested, *sumercé* and *sus mercedes* are retained and used by people of low social standing and by middle age and old people, among relatives and friends, and in the family circle (whenever their members are older than thirty or forty) in order to show respect, friendliness or endearment, according to the situation. Because of the cosmopolitan character of Bogotá neither new generations of Bogotianians nor newcomers are using *sumercé* any longer.

In Bogotá, Medellín, and Manizales, to mention a few cities in the Colombian sierras, it is compulsory that the bank employees address their customers with *don* , *doña*, accordingly, without distinction of age or social class. It is used with the given name if the person addressed is known, or whether their names have been read out of the bank slip or out of any other paper. Similar behaviour is observed in business and institutions other than banks<sup>5</sup>.

People specialized in marketing and publicity are indirectly influencing over people to use the familiar *tu* form. They recur more and more to this address form in their advertisements and in the promotion of their products. In Schools of Marketing

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<sup>5</sup> In a Nissan Car Dealer in Barranquilla, the attendant addressed me with *don*. "Why don?" I remarked. Smiling he said they were trained to do so, but that they often forgot and leaned to the familiar and respectful *señor*.

and Publicity teachers teach and urge their students to use the familiar *tu* when facing their clients or when promoting their products. For, it is believed that, by using this address form, they would attract buyers galore and the product would make itself enticing. If this is feasible for Bogotá, it is not for other cities and small towns, and rural areas where *sumercé*, *sus mercedes*, and *vos* are the norm and where tradition is deep-rooted and the mass media has no access.

In the Departments of Boyacá and Santander, as shown by Caballero C. in his novels on the Colombian violence, reflected upon the bloody struggles among liberals and conservatives, and the protagonists of which are natives of this country apply *sumercé* and *sus mercedes* to persons of respect, to the priest, to the patron or patroness, to the foreman, and to government employees; they also use them in the family circle, and among peasants themselves in formal and in everyday conversation, implying respect, endearment, affection, friendliness, or anger, depending on the situation. As a parenthetical remark and because it is related to the *sumercé* usage, it has been observed that sons and daughters ask their parents and other kin (grandparents, and uncles, and aunts) for benediction. "La bendición", they say. The person greeted should answer, "God bless you", or "Blessings". This kind of behaviour is common in Boyacá, Santander, Cauca, Nariño, and Putumayo, and in Caracas (Venezuela), it alludes to both submission and respect.

[Siervo to doctor]: "—En tiempos de mi mamá no había para qué. ¿No ve *sumercé* que no había botines?". (Siervo, p. 8).

[A lady to a bus driver]: "—¿*Sumercé* me lleva a Soatá? —preguntó en lo obscuro una voz de mujer". (Siervo, p. 13).

[Siervo to the government liquor store clerk]: "—Necesito ver al doctor que vende las medicinas, y que *sumercé* alojó anoche en su casa". (Siervo, p. 27).

[Tránsito to misía Dolores]: "—Mire su *mercé\** que yo no tengo a dónde ir con esta criaturita y me falta hasta la sal para la mazamorra". (Siervo, p. 31) .

[Tránsito to her husband]: "–Siete pesos, misiá Dolorcitas. Ya sumercé mano Siervo, que Dios se lo pague y me lo corone de gloria ...". (Siervo, p. 31).

[Siervo to Tránsito]: "¿Para dónde va sumercé tan sola a estas horas?". (Siervo, p. 32).

[Tránsito to don Floro] : "–Que sumercé me venda o me preste que ser1a mejor, un calabazo de miel [...]". (Siervo, p. ~8)

[Siervo to foreman]: "–Si sus mercedes me dejaran sembrar tabaco [...]". (Siervo, p. 57).

[Tránsito to priest]: "–No ha habido lugar sumercé, porque no hemos tenido para hacer la fiesta ...". (Siervo, p. 68).

[Narrator]: "Luego agregó volteando el jipa entre las manos. Vivo con ella hace dos años, sumercé". (Siervo, p. 68).

[Siervo to investigator]: "–¡Yo no sé sumercé. Me asusté cuando alguien me cayó encima [...]". (Siervo, p. 104).

[Siervo to The House's President]: "–¡Dichosos los ojos que lo ven, sumercé!"/"–¿Qué quieres?– le preguntó el presidente" ./ "–Saludar a sumercé, y recordarle que hace casi tres años me prometió que me sacaría libre muy pronto cuando fuera diputado". (Siervo, p. 125).

[Siervo's daughter to her father]: "–Sumercé perdone. El Sacramentico me salió de muy mala raza". (Siervo, p. 151).

[Narrator]: "–Buenos días sumercé –sin mirarlo, como si lo hubiera visto la víspera". (Siervo, p. 143).

In the Department of Boyacá, *mi persona* 'yo', *su persona* 'sumercé', 'vos', 'usted', and *nuestras personas* 'nosotros', 'ustedes' are used in the family circle, and among friends in order to show either empathy or respect at any social level. Peasants may also use it in addressing their boss or patron, or any person of superior social standing. There are also instances where these address forms imply humility.

[One of Siervo's acquaintances]: "–¡Hola! ¡Mano Siervo! ¿No es su persona el hijo de Sierva Joya la de la Peña Morada, alma bendita?". (Siervo, p. 23).

I was once in a small town 'pueblo' and asked a lady who happened to pass by me, "Señora, hágame el favor de decirme

dónde queda la Caja Agraria?". To this I got the reply, "Sumercé volteá y ahí [áj] mismito está, áj la ve. Luego, ¿Su persona no es de por estos lados?".

Story tellers from Boyacá, as well those imitating Boyacá natives, on the live TV Show *Sábados Felices*, greet the audience, "¿Buenas, tengan sus personas! ¿Cómo se topan?". This is indeed a sympathetic way to get into the ludicrous ambiance of this evening show. They may go on saying, "Sabén sus personas que un güen domingo, bien tempranítico, la jerótica [my wife, the ferocious one] y mi persona ...". These men's parliaments tell us how embedded *su persona* is in this community; they also display the token of humility underlying this address form.

*Sumercé*, *sus mercedes*, *mi persona*, *su persona*, and *nuestras personas* stand side by side. However, its frequency of use depends upon the speaker's preference and the sociolinguistic situation. They are used by learned people and by unlearned ones, by peasants and by city dwellers.

In Antioquia and in the Coffee Ring 'Eje Cafetero' (Caldas, Risaralda, Quindío) *sumercé* and *sus mercedes*, and *don* and *doña* are registered in everyday speech at any social level. While *sumercé* and *sus mercedes* are often used in the family circle and among friends, *don* and *doña* are found at formal situations. In Antioquia itself, *don* and *doña* are so widespread that it is said that anybody is entitled *don*, regardless of age or social position. Snatches of advertisements at Paisas restaurants (restaurants owned and/ or administered by Antioquia born people) in Bogotá read, "Sígase, mi don". Waiters address customers in a similar way, "Siéntese, mi don". ¿Qué le provoca, mi don? La doña (or sumercé), ¿Qué va a comer?". And, as if it were copied from Carrasquilla (Cf., Kany, Op. cit., p. 93), "Sus mercedes me dispensarán un momentico".

The use and usage of *don* and *doña* in the rural areas of the Boyacá-Cundinamarca Plateau do not differ a great deal from the use and usage of these address forms in Antioquia and in the Coffee Ring. They do not imply nobility, as it happened in the Colony and in the Independence period and long afterwards, but respect toward the person addressed or referred to. *don* and *doña*

may be followed by the given name, or by the last name, or by the full name. In some instances, *don so and 'soy Fulano de tal'* may be preceded by *el señor*, which gives this whole piece of speech unit a shade of both power and superiority. *Don* and *doña*, alone, may function as vocatives and are also used to address a stranger or to call somebody's attention.

[Notario to his wife]: "–Si al señor don Roque Piragua, cacique de este pueblo, no le da la gana [...]". (El Cristo, p. 22).

[Errand boy to Mayor]: "–Y sumercé no ha visto todavía al hijo de don Roque Piragua?". (El Cristo, p. 14).

[Mayor to errand boy]: "Corre hasta la plaza de abajo, y ves si ya salió el notario de la casa de don Roque". (Siervo, p. 37).

[Tránsito to Siervo]: "–Mientras mano Siervo habla sus negocios con don Roso o con don Ramirez [...]". (Siervo, p.43).

[Siervo to the farm key keeper]: "–Gracias, don Jesús. Nuestro Amo se lo pague. ¿y doña Celina, se conserva bien?". (Siervo, p. 44).

[Narrator]: "Sin atreverse [Siervo] a darle los buenos días a Roso el mayordomo y mucho menos a don Ramirez, el administrador [...]". (Siervo, p. 45).

[Misiá Silvestra to Siervo and his wife]: "A don Roso el mayordomo cuando venga por aquí a medirles el arriendo [...]" (Siervo, p. 48).

[Don Roso to Siervo]: "Tengo orden de don Ramirez de pagar la cuenta". (Siervo, p. 94) .

[President of The House to Siervo, in Santa Rosa de Viterbo]: "– No fuiste vos, no seas bruto, sino don Ramirez y el representante [...]". (Siervo, p. 120).

In the Department of Nariño, because of the overall use of the diminutive, *sumercé* and *sus mercedes* take the form *su mercecita* and *sus mercecitas*, respectively. They express affection (as when a mother addresses her child or her children, or when a husband addresses his wife and vice versa), a close collegial relationship and empathy (as when a secretary addresses a teacher or a student). These address forms may also come from a person whom you happen to come across casually. In a main street in Pasto, a lady,



dressed in a typical campesino outfit, approached to me, "¿Me podría decir su mercecita, dónde es que queda el puestico de salud? Que's que m'he sabido perder. Vuelta me dicen que's que's por aí". At the university a secretary asked a student, "Su mercecita me hace el favorcito de firmar aquí".

[Belisaria to the priest]: "Ay señor curita, háblele su mer- cé a la chiquilla [...]". (Los Clavijos, p. 14).

"No ha de creer su mercé señor cura, como ser[a]hora de no- che, como si le estuviera viendo".(Los Clavijos, p. 14).

[Andrés to his girlfriend]: "Eso. Como su mercé piense. Hora voy a tocar la oración; rezará". (Los Clavijos, p. 6).

In closing a brief comment on the diminutive in the urban and rural areas in Boyacá and Nariño is worth. It is registered in the speech of those who have formal education and those without it in the same situation or in a similar one; it is not restricted to a specific social class either. It is perhaps more often heard in the country than in the city. It expresses humility in the same way that *mi persona, su persona, sus personas* do. These latter address forms are less frequent in Nariño and Putumayo than in Boyacá, and they are found in the speech of cultured and uncultured people.

As far as the structure of the diminutive is concerned, monosyllables and bisyllables will take either *-ito, -ita*, or *-cito, -cita*. These last two forms sound like a short form for the standard Spanish *-ecito, -ecita*: *piecito, panecito, florcita, allacito, aquicito, yocita, tucita, tiito, todito, su mercecita, chiquita, bonita, altarito~altarito, pilaritor~pilarcito*. The diminutive *-ico, -ica* ending may be added to the already formed diminutive; the new diminutive formation displays a duplication of the diminutive form which is reflected on its meaning. The structural meaning is something like the smallest of the smallest in size, degree, amount, importance, etc.. It is apparent that the user reiterates the idea of smallness, but what he really does is to express his thought and the evaluation of it as if it were of no value. Finally the repetition of the diminutive in the same statement or sentence renders the idea of completeness, or

greatness in size, extent, which is normal in spoken Spanish: *bonitico, chiquitico, chiquititico, mañanítica, toditica, todititica*.

[Tránsito to Floro]: "[...] un calabazo de miel y si fuera posible una carguita de maíz [...]. (Siervo~ p. 38).

[Roso to Siervo]: "Todo esto, toditico, será por cuenta de los patrones". (Siervo, p. 49).

[Siervo to Manager of Caja Agraria]: "—Le traía [traje] a sumercé estas pepitas de naranja 'some oranges' para que se las coma en el almuerzo". (Siervo, p. 144).

[Siervo to landowner]: "Si sumercé me llevara la mano, se la firmaría ahorita mismo. y sumercé puede entregarme el recibito por los ciento cincuenta pesos". (Siervo, p. 180).

[Tránsito to Siervo]: "[...] yo voy en un prestico a la tienda de don Rubiano, a comprar fósforos y velas". (Siervo, p. 43) .

[Dolorcitas to priest]: "Aquí le traje a su reverencia unas mogollitas para su desayuno, que le dejé con la boba". (El Cristo, p. 42).

[Siervo to doctor]: "—¡Si son de los mismitos que yo llevo!". (Siervo, p. 9).

[Siervo to agent]: "—Estaba por darle a sumercé veinte pesos de arras, a nombre de mi hermanito, .con quien hablaré en cuanto amanezca". (Siervo, p. 19).

[A passenger to the driver]: "—Aquí nomasito la tengo, sumercé ..." (Siervo, p. 19).

[The maid to the priest]: "—¿Al fin va sumercé a tomarse el desayuno, que ya está con nata?". (El Cristo, p. 44).

[Siervo to foreman]: "—Si sus mercedes me dejaran sembrar tabaco en vez de esos palitos de maíz [...]. (Siervo, p. 38).

[Tránsito to landowner]: "A yo me parece, con perdón de sumercé, que sin agüita no vale la pena comprar ese pedregalón [...]. (Siervo, p. 180).