

**We Teach Languages Episode 139: Teaching Linguistic Variation such as Voseo in Spanish with Matthew Griffin**

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**Stacey Margarita Johnson**:  [0:00] This is "We Teach Languages," a podcast about language teaching from the diverse perspectives of teachers.

[0:08] I'm Stacey Margarita Johnson, and today on episode 139, I speak with Matthew Griffin about his article recently published in Spanish and Portuguese review. While the original title of the article is in Spanish, it translates roughly to "Evidence for the Teaching of Voseo in Spanish Classes."

[0:38] This is part two in our four‑part series highlighting practical, actionable research, recently published open‑access, and available to everyone in Spanish and Portuguese review which you can find online at spanishandportuguesereview.org.

[0:55] [music]

**Matthew Griffin**:  [1:03] My name is Matthew Griffin. I am originally from Goldsboro, North Carolina. I moved to Madison, Wisconsin to work on my PhD in Applied Spanish Linguistics, with PhD minors in Second Language Acquisition and in English Language and Linguistics.

[1:22] I am currently a visiting Spanish Linguistics instructor at Gustavos Adolphus College which is a Swedish Lutheran College in St. Peter, Minnesota. [laughs]

**Stacey**:  [1:34] Wow, that is so interesting. [laughs]

**Matthew**:  [1:37] It's a very interesting considering I grew up in a Thai American household. I grew up going to a Thai Buddhist temple so to now be at a Lutheran College is...It's a very interesting experience. I have been here now since the fall semester, and I have enjoyed my time here.

[1:57] I have really enjoyed noticing the different types of influence that Swiss immigrants had on the communities around here as well as at my institution. Actually there is a Swedish program that is doing very well, and I took one semester of Swedish but all I can remember is [Swedish] .

**Stacey**:  [2:16] [laughs] That's excellent. I get a tiny though so I'm trying to learn Swedish. It's because I'm descendant from Swedish folks and now, I'm talking to you, and you're like, "Yeah, I took a Swedish class." I feel like Swedish is taunting me.

**Matthew**:  [2:36] It is. I don't believe in coincidences but this has to say something.

**Stacey**:  [2:40] I'm moving to Sweden immediately. That's settled. This article that you wrote is called "Evidencias a favor de la enseñanza del voseo en las clases de español," which means "Evidence in Favor of Teaching Voseo."

[2:55] Since we have such a diverse audience, I think some people might not understand what "voseo" is, why it's significant in Spanish, and what the controversy is around it.

**Matthew**:  [3:05] Voseo for listeners that are not familiar with this, I suppose the term that is used to refer to the use of the second‑person singular pronoun "vos." In Spanish‑speaking countries, we find it today in several Spanish‑speaking countries and Latin America. That is replaced the informal pronoun "TÚ."

[3:31] It is interestingly no longer found in Spain. Spain does have "vosotros" which I like to think of as...what I used in English "y'all."

**Stacey**:  [3:41] Yeah, the y'all form.

**Matthew**:  [3:42] Exactly. [laughs]

**Stacey**:  [3:43] Only Southerners can really make that clear for students.

[3:45] [laughter]

**Matthew**:  [3:48] That form actually, the vos is no longer used in Spain but we do find it used in Latin America. For some reason, within the context of, in the Spanish language classroom, it is often overlooked. When I went into this paper, I was asking myself, "Why is that?"

[4:10] Especially as somebody that study in Spain, I lived there so I do used vosotros with my friends despite the fact that it's found in all lower level textbooks in a Spanish classroom. I ask myself, "Why are we teaching a form, vosotros and its conjugations, the particular paradigm when it's only used by one country?"

[4:33] Whereas vos can be found, still used today in several other countries. There are more speakers that used vos than vosotros.

**Stacey**:  [4:40] Right. It seems like the argument that you make in the paper is that if we're going to teach student one of these forms, really, vos would have a lot more utility for them. [laughs] What's the argument that you're making of why we should be including vos?

**Matthew**:  [5:00] I believe I actually have two arguments. The first argument being because there are so many speakers that use vos within Spanish‑speaking America, and that's including those that come to the US from Central America, for example.

[5:19] It appears essential for us to address it at the lower levels because if anything, our students will come across Spanish speakers within the US and within a study abroad context that use vos.

[5:35] It's only important to be able to expose our students to vos as well as linguistic variation on general in the Spanish‑speaking countries because I do believe without some type of exposure...

[5:50] A particular article by Shank in 2014 for example, who mentions that it's important to have us in explicit focus on the language differences that we can find because oftentimes, students might not pick up on them.

**Stacey**:  [6:07] You mentioned linguistic variation. Can you tell us a little bit more about what linguistic variation is? What do you mean by that?

**Matthew**:  [6:15] By linguistic variation, if we were to frame it within the United States, for example, in my own Spanish classrooms, when I do switch English, I grew up using the pronoun "y'all." Then moving to the Midwest, realizing that people either defaulted to "you" within the plural sense, which is for me is actually confusing.

**Stacey**:  [6:40] [laughs]

**Matthew**:  [6:41] Or "you guys," which for some people functions as the standard form, but for me the use of the "guy" itself, "you guys" for me, I would be speaking directly with a group of men or people that identified as male.

[7:00] Within the US, we have these different varieties of how to directly address a group of people. I can think of y'all, you guys, yous guys, yinz, yous. [laughs]

**Stacey**:  [7:13] Some of those, I have not heard.

**Matthew**:  [7:17] [laughs] Exactly. There's so much variation we have we currently don't have within, as I call it, book English.

**Stacey**:  [7:25] That's very interesting.

**Matthew**:  [7:26] The linguistic variation being within one particular language, we can find different lexical items or different grammatical structures. It's still the same language, but there's variation within that.

**Stacey**:  [7:43] It's really interesting also that...I've lived on the West Coast. I've spent most of my life in the South. I've lived in the Midwest. I've lived abroad. At least two of the five different varieties of you plural that you just mentioned, I have never heard in context before. I've never noticed that I heard them, if I did.

**Matthew**:  [8:03] Even as native speakers, since you had moved around within the US, if you had heard those forms, you most likely weren't aware that you were hearing those forms. Funny thing, we're listening more towards the message instead of what words or structures are being used to convey that message. I annoyingly listen quite often to how people speak rather than what they are saying.

**Stacey**:  [8:29] You are a linguist.

[8:31] [laughter]

**Matthew**:  [8:31] Exactly. My friends are not fans of that. They know if I were to ask, "Could you please repeat that?" they know I'm analyzing their speech.

[8:39] [laughter]

**Matthew**:  [8:41] In terms of how can we incorporate it into the classroom? I did hear the argument when I first started writing this article. We are already presenting so much information to our students with the different pronouns and the conjugations and the language. Why would we want to add on to that?

[9:03] I suppose I never necessarily thought of it as adding more information on. It almost makes it sound as if we're teaching them equations. I think it's important to teach variation even if students are not productive users of a particular variety, for example.

[9:24] It's important to expose them so that when they are speaking with native speakers in terms of dialects of Spanish, there is so much variation. To say that we teach a "standard," the question you have to ask yourself is what standard variety of the language and who's standard variety of the language are we teaching?

[9:45] I don't think it's a bad thing to teach variation at all. I don't think of it as compounding and adding on. If it's presented in such a way that you are making...Simply commenting, for example, I had my students listen to a dialog between three Spanish speakers in a bar ‑‑ two of them from Spain and one was from Uruguay.

[10:10] After they listened to the clip and these are students in second semester Spanish, I had asked them to consider why, for example, this male from Spain had asked the female from Uruguay, "Are you from Argentina?"

[10:26] Then I had asked my students, "Why do you think he confused her as an Argentinean‑speaker Spanish?" as an Argentinean person. We had a discussion on that and then sure enough, once we've listened to the clip again, they were able to analyze that particular sound in her speech.

[10:47] For those that aren't familiar, there are a few sounds that are associated with the letters Y and double L in Uruguay and in Argentina so they would be pronounced as "Ja" or "Cha," for example.

[11:07] Even just having my students recognize that early on, they realized, "Oh, so that is how that sound is pronounced in these areas." They were then able to realize, "Oh, it's like your [non‑English speech] that's what I know to be [non‑English speech] ," or whatever pronunciation that they have learned in their courses.

**Stacey**:  [11:25] I can see how this would be maybe when we're examining like as a teacher, I'm always bringing in authentic resources that center actual language users using the language.

[11:39] I can see how this would be something when we watch a video or when we listen to audio, just one extra conversation to have in addition to all the things we do to parse it for meaning.

**Matthew**:  [11:50] Correct.

**Stacey**:  [11:50] Also thinking through what do you hear? How was it the same or different from how you would phrase it or how we've heard other people phrase it?

**Matthew**:  [11:58] Exactly. Fortunately, it does not take too much out of our time and does not take away from the actual lesson itself whether it's communicative or task‑based. Just mentioning something that we are providing our students with that explicit feedback, that they're able to focus on this particular feature.

[12:16] They digest it and then they're able...I've noticed then missed my classes. Later on, they're able to recollect that information, "Oh, that's speaker's from Spain," for example.

**Stacey**:  [12:27] Yeah, I mean because it's the same in English. I can tell whether someone is from the South or from the West Coast often without even consciously recognizing the linguistic features that speak to that.

**Matthew**:  [12:39] I do believe when we simplify things in the second‑language classroom, oftentimes it's a detriment to the language acquisition of our students. Simplifying language, if anything, we're not really preparing them with the tools that they need in order to understand and to be able to communicate with native speakers.

[13:01] I know that based on the research I've done, that if we don't provide this information to our students, going back to Ching's article, for example, which actually focused on the injection of voseo as well in addition to linguistic variation in a second‑language classroom.

[13:23] That our students won't pick up on it and therefore over time could essentially hinder comprehension. I can think back to when I was living in Spain, for example, and I was used to that particular radio central Northern Peninsula's Spanish. I met somebody from Uruguay actually.

[13:48] We were both tutors for two children in a Spanish family. I tutor in English and she tutored in Math. She instructed one of the boys in Spanish, " [Spanish] ," which in my Spanish would be "[Spanish]."

[14:10] I actually had no idea what she was saying for two reasons. One reason I didn't understand was because she had used both conjugation instead of the two which I was familiar with and is used in Spain. She said [Spanish] both instead of [Spanish] .

[14:30] The second reason was because of her pronunciation of the word [Spanish] which was [Spanish] . I was there for a moment asking, "Did she mention something about a sea shell? What is she telling this child?" until I saw him sit down in a seat.

[14:48] Thankfully within that context if you find yourself being able to study abroad or travel to a place in which the language you're studying is used, I made the connection, "Ah, I understand what she's saying." I was never exposed to neither vos nor to that particular type of pronunciation from Uruguay.

**Stacey**:  [15:10] Right. I think that is hopeful for teachers who know that we...I don't have a facility with vos. Although I have people who I interacted frequently from Nicaragua or Uruguay who I have gotten to hear them use vos. I don't feel like I have a facility with it. I could never model it for my students.

[15:31] It is hopeful to know that just the exposure and me pointing out where that linguistic variation is will help them decipher further interactions that they have down the line.

**Matthew**:  [15:45] Exactly. There are many Spanish instructors and professors that actually teach the conjugations, the paradigm for vosotros, the you plural for informal form from Spain but don't use it. They don't [Spanish] . They haven't exerted. They simply just teach it.

[16:09] I suppose it's very similar in a sense that they're exposing this to something they could come across in Spain at least for students that decide to study abroad in the Spanish‑speaking countries. Spain is the number one destination.

[16:25] They're still exposing students to a form that is unfamiliar to them or something that's archaic that's found in the Bible. That's something that is productive or inactive conjugation they used in their daily lives.

**Stacey**:  [16:39] One of the things you mentioned in your paper is that in some places vos is marked as a stigmatized form.

**Matthew**:  [16:49] That's correct.

**Stacey**:  [16:50] I can't help but think that that is part of the preference of teachers and textbooks to teach something like vosotros which obviously comes from the colonial country and has that prestige to it. Whereas vos, sometimes it's even stigmatized.

**Matthew**:  [17:09] Exactly. Unfortunately, even today, we have this variety but speakers for one reason or another feels that their particular way of speaking is somehow improper or incorrect compared to Peninsula variety for example.

[17:28] Perhaps that could be something that's perpetuated by our textbooks opting to use certain forms from Spain, for example, or vocabulary items. There is that type of stigma but I do think at the same time, there are countries that are recognizing it has...For example, in Argentina, it is considered a standard form that you find in advertisements.

[17:50] I do think it's important for us to discuss vos in our classes. If we are to consider, for example, we will have heritage speakers of Spanish that come from Southern Mexico, so come from Chiapas, where vos can be found, or from Central American countries in which we can find the pronoun used as well.

[18:15] Addressing it in class places some type of...I don't want to use the word prestige, but places some importance on it so that student heritage speakers of the language don't feel that their variety is somehow improper because it's not what the textbook addresses.

[18:33] In fact, if they do use vos in their speech communities, that it is a perfectly fine form that can be found Spanish‑Speaking America.

**Stacey**:  [18:43] This idea of the textbook is the second half of your paper where you look through the major Spanish textbooks and evaluate them as far as how they present vos or if they present vos. I would love to know in review by looking through all these textbooks for their treatment of vos, what did you learn?

**Matthew**:  [19:07] Before starting my research for this paper, I did see that there were already publications on vos promoting the teaching of vos in the classroom, but some of these papers were from the '80s.

[19:22] One of the more recent ones, that I cited at the very top of my article from [inaudible] in 2002, it seems that the same argument was being repeated over and over, and yet it was a message not being received by Spanish instructors or it was falling on deaf ears.

[19:43] I wanted to approach it a bit differently by actually examining the textbooks that we do use in our classrooms by publishers in the US and seeing how they approached the pronoun and the conjugations. If we have to plan quickly at the lower levels. We very much follow the textbook chapter by chapter and the grammar in which it's presented.

[20:14] I wanted to look how was vos being presented if at all. I noticed it's variable. Whether it's presented at all, it tends to be just a minor footnote. It did notice in one textbook actually, it was misrepresented as vosotros, the second person plural form, which could be problematic.

**Stacey**:  [20:37] Yikes.

**Matthew**:  [20:39] The textbooks I looked at were both at the beginner level as well as the intermediate level. We would assume at least a beginner level if we want to use the argument.

[20:49] We don't want to provide our students with too much information, but I would assume we would address it in the intermediate classes, considering students in the college levels, for example, tend to study abroad between their sophomore and junior year. In intermediate textbooks, we see that lack of vos being addressed as well.

**Stacey**:  [21:14] Where at that point, they're more likely to be interacting with communities, speakers of the language. It seems like it would be more useful for them.

**Matthew**:  [21:24] We're not preparing those students. We can say these are the standard forms, but just be mindful that there are these different uses that you can find in other countries, and just to be aware of what the textbook presents is just one particular variety.

[21:41] You will find, when you begin to actually use a language with speakers, with L1 or first language speakers of the language, just to be open. You will see that Spanish is much more than what the book presents. It's very vibrant. Language really comes down to how speakers use it. They use it in a variety of different and creative ways.

**Stacey**:  [22:04] That's awesome. I am going to encourage listeners...Let me back up just a little bit. One of the things that I really love about our academic profession is that it's the responsibility of teachers and researchers who use these books to read them carefully and evaluate them, and publicly publish their findings.

[22:29] One of the things about this article that's so useful is that anyone listening can go to your article even if you're not a Spanish teacher, but you just want to get a sense for what the textbooks are doing around linguistic variation.

[22:45] If you are a Spanish teacher at different level and these kinds of textbooks aren't the ones you're using but you want to get a sense for what's out there, this analysis of...How many? One, two, three, four, five, six, seven different textbooks that are widely used from big publishers and breaking down how they're doing.

[23:05] You can go to the article online. Look at this academic analysis, and get a sense for where the field is as far as including linguistic variation at the earlier level.

[23:17] Thank you so much for doing the work and for publishing it so we can all benefit from it.

[23:22] [background music]

**Matthew**:  [23:23] Thank you very much for having me.

**Stacey**:  [23:26] It's my pleasure.

[23:30] If you have questions or comments related to today's episode, we would love to hear from you. You can reach out to us multiple ways, all of them are available at our website, weteachlang.com/contact. You can also find us on Facebook and Twitter, @weteachlang.

[23:50] We would like to say a very special thank you to the PEARLL Foreign Language Resource Center for partnering with us to provide transcripts and other professional development resources related to the episodes. You can learn more about PEARLL by going pearll.nflc.umd.edu.

[24:18] Thanks so much for listening. Bye‑bye.

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