

How much sociolinguistics is there on the genesis of nominal forms of address in Portuguese?

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In the history of Portuguese, the genesis of nominal forms of address such as *Vossa Mercê* (Your Mercy) has been described based on the analysis of historical pragmatics. The traditional linguistic literature available on this topic (Basto 1931; Said Ali 1937; Nascentes 1956; Luz 1958; Cintra 1972; Faraco 1996) correlates social factors, such as the hierarchical structure of Medieval Portuguese Society and the position occupied by *the king*, to *linguistic changes in the addressing paradigm in which the pronoun Vós (You) was the only form used in terms of distance in opposition to the intimate Tu (You)*. The arguments most often used point out to a social necessity to treat the king with the courtesy required by his position. The insertion of the first nominal form – *Vossa Mercê* – is thus justified by the fact that the pronoun *Vós*, with accelerated semantic-pragmatic bleaching, displayed, in the 15th century, signs of weakness. That is why a new form, coated with more courtesy and indirectness, would have been recruited to the royal figure.

However, no attention has been given to the fact that the data from the 14th century show *Vossa Mercê* as an ordinary possessive phrase. In this paper, I suggest that such courtesy forms are not “artificially” introduced in the addressing system due to pragmatic requirements. Based on texts from Medieval Portuguese – from 14th to 16th centuries – (Davies and Ferreira 2006), I argue that the genesis itself should be placed and described in grammatical terms. The entrance of the nominal forms of address in the Portuguese addressing system presupposes an initial stage of grammatical change when the possessive phrase *Vossa Mercê* is reanalyzed as a pronominal form.

The results can be summarized as follows: (i) in the 14th century, *Vossa Mercê* has the same behavior as the other possessive phrases; (ii) in the 15th century, on the one hand, it is possible to find data which preserve the behavior of the earlier century. On the other hand, there is a group of examples which seems to move away from the possessive phrase category, showing pronominal behavior. Concerning subject position, two verbal agreement patterns are found: 2nd person plural and 3rd person singular. The apparent variation in these patterns is analyzed as different constructions with different number features: the first one, the direct product of reanalysis, is, like *Vós*, a 2nd person polite plural; the second one is a 2nd person singular construction. These different constructions can suggest different stages of the language change; (iii) from the 16th century on, *Vossa Mercê* is a pronominalized “single and frozen block” which appears with verbs showing only 3rd person agreement markers. Conjugating a formal syntactic approach (Roberts and Roussou 2003; Harley and Ritter 2002; Béjar 2008) and an empirical variationist methodology (Labov 1972, 1994), this study contributes to the discussion of the importance that has been given to external factors in the studies of language change in the addressing paradigm without considering the properties and possibilities of grammar, i. e., the internal factors.