

Tú o Usted — English translation

Recurso de apoyo opcional. Úsalo como red de seguridad, no como sustituto del español.

Antes de leer esto en lugar del español...

Intenta escuchar primero solo en español. Este documento es una red de seguridad, no un sustituto: si lees la traducción antes de escuchar, pierdes la práctica real.

PALABRA = tiene entrada en el Vocabulario · frase = relacionada con el punto de Gramática

INTRODUCTION (ENGLISH)

Hey... welcome back to Poco a Poco Podcast.

Today I want to tell you a story about my friend Yuki.

Yuki is Japanese.

We met years ago... doing karate at university.

And last spring, he came to visit me here, in Valencia.

Yuki speaks some Spanish... not much, but he tries.

And he had one big problem.

In Japanese, when you talk to a stranger, you have to be very, very polite.

So Yuki wanted to be polite in Spanish too.

But being polite in Spanish... is not the same thing.

Today... when to say "tú" and when to say "usted".

And why my Japanese friend got it so wrong... so many times.

As always, slow Spanish, with English explanations at the end.

Let's go.

CUERPO PRINCIPAL (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

Okay... let me tell you.

Yuki arrived in Valencia on a Saturday morning.

I went to pick him up at the airport.

But first... I have to explain something about him.

Yuki had studied Spanish at a language school, in Japan.

With a textbook.

And textbooks... almost always teach 'usted' first.

They say 'usted' is safer.

More polite.

So Yuki arrived in Spain... talking like a book.

And from the very first moment... I noticed something odd.

Yuki spoke to everyone using 'usted'.

To everyone.

To the taxi driver, he said... 'Good morning, could you take us to the centre, please?'

And on top of that... he gave a little nod of the head.

Almost like a Japanese greeting... but sitting in the taxi.

The taxi driver looked at him in the mirror... and burst out laughing.

Not in a bad way, though.

It was a friendly laugh.

He told him... 'Come on, man, there's no need for so much ceremony **(NO HACE FALTA)**... take it easy.'

And Yuki was left confused.

Because in Japanese... it doesn't work like this.

In Japanese there's keigo... formal language.

And with someone you don't know, keigo isn't optional.

It's obligatory.

The words change, the verbs change... the whole sentence changes.

For example... the verb changes form.

The word for 'I' often disappears.

And everything becomes longer... softer... more indirect.

It's a beautiful system... but very complicated.

And you have to learn it from a young age.

If you don't use keigo with a stranger, you come across really badly **(QUEDAR FATAL)**.

So, for Yuki... addressing everyone formally was the normal thing.

It was the correct thing.

It was the polite thing.

No one had explained to him that in Spain... you can be polite... and warm at the same time.

But in Spain... things are different.

In Spanish, 'usted' exists too.

Of course it exists.

But it isn't used with everyone.

In Spain, with most people... we address each other as 'tú' (TUTEAR).

The taxi driver, the waiter, a person your age in the street...

tú, tú, tú.

We save 'usted' for special situations.

For an older person... for something very formal... to show respect or distance.

Think for a moment about English.

In English there's no such problem.

There's only 'you'.

One word for everyone.

If you want to be polite in English, you change the tone... you say 'sir', you say 'could you'...

but the word doesn't change.

In English, politeness is in how you say it... not in which word you use.

Notice how curious that is.

Japanese says it with grammar.

English says it with tone.

And Spanish... says it with a single word.

Three languages, three ways of being polite.

And none is better than another.

They're just different.

Each language has its own logic... and its own way of showing respect.

Okay... I'll carry on with the story.

After the airport, we went to have breakfast.

A normal, neighbourhood café.

Yuki wanted a café con leche.

And when the waiter came... Yuki sat up very straight.

Very serious.

Ready to speak formally again.

But the waiter, before anything else, came out with **(SOLTAR)**... 'Hi! What can I get you?'

'Te.' — the informal 'you'.

'What can I get you?' — informally.

And Yuki... froze **(QUEDARSE DE PIEDRA)**.

He turned to me and asked, in a low voice... 'Why is he talking to me like that?'

'Have I done something wrong?'

Yuki was genuinely worried.

He thought the waiter was angry with him.

When, in reality... it was exactly the opposite.

And I laughed.

I told him... 'No, no, Yuki... you haven't done anything wrong.'

'It's just that here it works the other way around **(AL REVÉS)**.'

In Japan, addressing someone you don't know as 'tú' can sound abrupt **(BRUSCO)**.

Too direct.

But in Spain... 'tú' isn't rude.

Quite the opposite.

'Tú' is warm **(CERCANO)**.

'Tú' says... 'we're on the same level, relax, we're just normal people talking.'

When a waiter addresses you as 'tú'... he isn't disrespecting you **(FALTAR AL RESPETO)**.

He's treating you as one of the group **(COMO A UNO MÁS)**.

And that, in Spain, is a good thing.

It's a way of opening the door... instead of closing it.

Yuki was left thinking.

And he said a very lovely thing to me.

He said... 'So... in Spain, closeness (**LA CONFIANZA**) is given away (**REGALAR**) quickly.'

And yes.

It's a good way of putting it.

After breakfast, we took a walk through the centre.

And Yuki was trying it all out.

He used 'tú' with the girl at a souvenir shop.

He used 'tú' with a man who took a photo of us.

He was very proud of his new 'tú'.

Although, once... he took it a bit too far.

He used 'tú' with a police officer standing on the corner.

The officer didn't say anything.

But he gave him a look... that said 'not with me, young man'.

But of course... he still had one lesson left.

But careful (**¡OJO!**)... don't think that 'usted' has disappeared.

No.

That same afternoon, we went up to my flat.

And in the lift... we ran into my neighbour.

An elderly lady, doña Amparo (**DOÑA**).

She's well into her eighties.

And she's been my neighbour my whole life (**DE TODA LA VIDA**).

And here... I address her as 'usted' (TRATAR DE USTED).

Always.

I said... 'Good afternoon, doña Amparo, how are you?'

Addressing her as 'usted' is a way of saying... 'I respect you.'

It isn't cold distance.

It's respect with affection.

And Yuki noticed it right away.

He looked at me as if to say... 'Ah! Now, yes!'

Finally, an 'usted'.

Yuki was happy.

He was back on familiar ground.

And he asked me, later, once we were home... 'So how do you know when to use one or the other?'

Good question.

I explained my rule, which is very simple.

By default (**POR DEFECTO**)... 'tú'.

In Spain, start with 'tú' almost always.

But if the person is older... or it's a very formal situation... or you want to show respect and distance... use 'usted'.

And if you're unsure (**TENER DUDAS**) with an older person... start with 'usted'.

If they tell you *'you can use tú with me' (tutearme)*... then you switch to 'tú'.

It's easier to come down from 'usted' to 'tú'... than to go up from 'tú' to 'usted'.

Yuki nodded.

And he said, laughing... 'In Japan this took me twenty years.'

'Here you've explained it to me in one afternoon.'

Well... it isn't that easy, of course.

But the general idea, yes.

And by the end of the day... Yuki was already using 'tú' with the dinner waiter.

With a smile.

And he addressed doña Amparo as 'usted' when we saw her again.

He'd got it (**CAPTAR**).

Well... almost.

At dinner, without meaning to (**SIN QUERER**), he addressed the waiter as 'usted' again.

And the waiter told him... 'Take it easy... here we're all friends.'

And the three of us laughed.

CLOSING — VOCABULARY & GRAMMAR (ENGLISH)

Okay... let's look at some of the language from the story.

First word... "tutear".

"Tutear" is a verb that means... to speak to someone using "tú".

English has no verb for this... so we'd need a whole phrase, like "to speak to someone informally".

In Spanish, it's one single word... tutear.

"Nos tuteamos" means... we speak to each other with "tú".

The opposite is "tratar de usted"... to address someone formally.

"A mi jefe lo trato de usted" means... I address my boss formally.

Notice we say tratar de usted... with the little word "de".

Next word... "la confianza".

"Confianza" looks like the English word "confidence"... and sometimes it does mean that.

But here it means something closer to... closeness, trust, familiarity.

When you have "confianza" with someone, you can relax... you can use "tú"... you can joke.

That's why Yuki said... "la confianza se regala rápido."

And the last word... "cercano".

Literally, "cercano" means "close"... in distance.

But with people, "cercano" means warm, approachable, easy to talk to.

In Spain, being "cercano" is a compliment.

Now, a quick grammar point... the verbs "tutear" and "tratar de usted".

These two verbs describe the act of choosing tú or usted.

"¿Nos tuteamos?" is a magic little question.

It means... "shall we switch to tú?"

You can say it to move from formal to informal... politely.

"Prefiero tratarle de usted" means... "I prefer to address you formally."

And here are a few safe formulas for strangers, using usted.

"Disculpe, ¿sabe dónde está...?"

"¿Me puede ayudar?"

"¿Le importa si...?"

Notice these use the usted forms... sabe, puede, importa.

My tip... in Spain, start with tú with people your own age.

And use usted with older people, or in formal places.

If in doubt with someone older... start with usted, and come down to tú later.

Okay... that's it for today.

Poco a poco... you'll start to feel when to use each one.

Nos vemos en el próximo episodio.

¡Hasta pronto!