



## *Ustedes or vosotros?*

When talking about the 2nd person plural in Spanish, there tends to be some confusion. I've heard people say that they only learn *ustedes* in their Spanish lessons because they were told they would never have to use *vosotros*. The problem comes when those people decide to travel to Spain and they realize that the majority of Spaniards use *vosotros*. Why is it? Well, this is our blog entry for today!

To start with, I'd like to say that both personal pronouns, *ustedes* and *vosotros*, are absolutely correct. No matter which one you decide to use, you won't be making a mistake! Your preference will most likely show WHERE you learned Spanish. Since both refer to the same person, 2nd person plural, the difference lies not so much in what they mean, but in what parts of the world they are used and in what context.

### **Vosotros**

This pronoun is only used in Spain. It is regarded as the plural form of *tú*. For instance: *tú eres mi amigo; vosotros sois mis amigos* (you are my friend; you guys are my friends). It has its unique verbal conjugation to indicate reference to the 2nd person plural. In Spain, the use of this pronoun is employed in familiar and informal contexts (just as *tú* in singular). You would use this pronoun with your family, friends or other peers: *vosotros tenéis hambre?* (Are you guys hungry?) In the rest of the Spanish-speaking population, this pronoun is simply not used. They actually employ the pronoun *ustedes*.

### **Ustedes**

This pronoun is the plural form of *usted*. Unlike *vosotros*, *ustedes* uses the verbal conjugation of the 3rd person plural, although it refers to 2nd person plural contexts. The reason for this is due to its etymology (\*). The general use of this pronoun is in more formal and unfamiliar contexts, (just as *usted* in singular) both in Spain and the rest of the Spanish-speaking countries. It implies courtesy and a certain distance, because you are talking to people you don't know (or don't know very well) or that deserve a certain kind of respect. If you were the CEO of a company, you would use this pronoun if you were talking to potential clients, for example. Or you would use it to talk to elderly people. For instance: *quiere usted sentarse?* (Would you like to sit down?) As I said, this is true for both Spain and the rest of the Spanish speaking countries. However, in Latin American countries as well as in some parts of Spain (Canary Islands and Western Andalucía) the term *ustedes* is also used to refer to informal contexts. This means that, in those geographical areas, *ustedes* is used as the



only way to refer to formal and informal 2nd person plural contexts. For example, if I invite some friends over to my house and I want to offer them some coffee, I can say either: *vosotros queréis tomar un café?* or *ustedes quieren tomar un café?* The meaning is the same. The only difference is that the former is only used in Spain. The latter is used in the rest of the Spanish-speaking countries and a few areas of Spain.

If I decide to use *ustedes*, how can I know when it's formal or informal? Well, the only way to know it is through the context you are in!

So, which one is better to use? If we refer to informal contexts, you can use whichever term you are more comfortable with! What I do recommend is knowing both terms, so that it doesn't take you by surprise if you go to Spain! If, on the contrary, we refer to formal contexts, you will never go wrong with *ustedes*.

(\*) Etymology of *usted*: it is the short form of *vuestra merced*, (3rd person), which used to be very commonly used back in the XV century to refer to very important people, such as a king or an emperor.