

## What's the origin of polite forms in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural?

They are actually of Latin origin, though not Classical Latin. Under the empire, it came to be customary to refer to the emperor in the second person plural (*uos* instead of *tu*). This precise reason for this isn't entirely clear: it may have something to do with the fact that there were two emperors by this point (one of the Western and one of the eastern halves of the empire), or reflect that the emperor also spoke for his retinue, or reflect his status as speaker for all those he ruled. The first person plural is often used by those in leadership positions, both in Latin and English, when they wish to imply that they are speaking for the collective, not just for themselves (Obama's inaugural address contains, by my count 3 "I"s—all in the first few sentences—and 67 "we"s).

As time went on, however, the plural used for the emperor came to be regarded as a reflection of his superior status. Eventually those in the upper classes were addressed by "uos" while addressing their lesser as "tu" and the usage came to be extended to any superior: master to servants, parents to children, etc. In addition to this usage to reflect power, elites came use *uos* to one another, with peers. It hence became the "polite" form, and was often used of equals, at least when they were not on intimate terms.

In contemporary French and German, my understanding is that speakers who get to know one another eventually abandon the plural for the singular to mark their friendship. It is usually the superior in the relationship who offers the less formal term.