

**Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language**

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Abstract

This paper explores how a group of ten Argentinean student teachers from the Teacher Training Program, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Argentina, construe their social identity through the use of language. The instruments for data collection were a dyadic interaction task which was recorded on tape, transcribed and, later on, analyzed and interpreted. Based on the results obtained, it was inferred that these learners needed to satisfy some personal needs such as traveling, buying a house, a car or doing charity before they actually involved themselves in doing research. To further validate these findings more research in this area should be conducted.

Key Words: Speaking, discourse analysis, social reality.



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

INTRODUCTION

Language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interrelated with other elements of social life. Discourse analysis (henceforth, DA) is a view of language in use; that is to say, how, through the use of language, people can accomplish certain communicative goals, perform certain communicative acts, take part in certain communicative situations and present themselves to others (Paltridge, 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how, through the use of language, a group of ten trainees in Argentina construe their social reality. In the first part of this paper, the theoretical concepts that will be partly used as criteria to analyze and interpret the findings obtained will be presented. In the next section, the context, participants and instruments for data collection will be described. Then, the information gathered will be analyzed and interpreted, and the findings discussed. Finally, some avenues for further research in the area will be suggested.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DA can be defined -on a daily basis as most people use the term- as the study of language. Although these people, when they refer to language, they mean: talk, communication and discourse, in formal language study, the term *language* is used to refer to structures or rules that are taught to underlie talk. Even if DA can be basically interpreted as the study of language, then, a further explanation of what makes DA a different approach to language study is necessary (Johnstone, 2002).

Some discourse analysts focus their attention on traditionally linguistic-oriented aspects of language such as the linguistic structure of texts, language change, variation, meaning, and language acquisition, among others. Others researchers in the field, however, deal not only with these traditionally linguistic-oriented aspects of language but also with topics which are more interdisciplinary in their nature. For instance, they explore aspects related to social roles and relations, communication and identity, and gender, to name a few. What makes a difference between DA and other sort of language studies that bear on human communication lies in the fact that DA focuses on the analysis and interpretation of the structure and function of language in use (Johnstone, 2002).

While linguists have long been interested in the study of structure of words and sentences, discourse analysts have gone one step upwards regarding the description of structure. That is DA



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

aims at examining longer stretches of connected text (spoken or written), and at providing descriptions of the structure of paragraphs, stories, and conversations. DA has contributed to elucidate how meaning can be conveyed through the arrangement of information units across a series of sentences, how speakers manage to make noticeable their semantic implicit intentions, how hearers infer what they hear, and how to interpret the implicit cognitive abilities that underpin the use of non-linguistic symbols in human interactions.

DA has also helped to describe how people use utterances to perform actions and to understand what people mean by what they say, rather than what words in their most literal sense might mean in isolation. Meaning-making chiefly depends not only on what is explicitly said in a text but also on what is implicit, that is, what is assumed. Worded differently, what is said in a text always rests upon unsaid assumptions, so part of the analysis of texts implies the identification of what is assumed (Johnstone, 2002).

DA is interested in the relationship between language and the context in which it is used. Regarding this connection, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) acknowledge the minor attention which is often given to the role of context for the analysis of discourse in the light of some approaches. They say that discourse is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking context into account. Utterances are only meaningful if we consider their use in a given situation, if we recognize the underlying conventions and rules, if we acknowledge the embedding in a certain culture and ideology (Locke, 2004).

Not only is context a pre-existing cultural construct to be applied, but also it is created in the discourse process itself (Locke 2004). The view to discourse as the social construction of reality considers text as communicative units which are embedded in social and cultural practices. The different texts that people craft both shape and are shaped by their practices. Consequently, discourse shapes the world and the world shapes discourse (Paltridge, 2006).

Most studies on DA are heavily influenced by Halliday's grammar and his systemic functional approach to linguistic analysis. In his approach, Halliday highlights the relationship between the grammatical system and the social and personal needs that language is required to serve (Locke, 2004). Halliday distinguishes three types of meanings. Each imposes a set of structures on the language. The information structure divides the information being conveyed into manageable units or chunks and imposes structures such as *given* and *new*. *New* information is information the speaker has coded as not recoverable from the context. *Given* information, on the



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

other hand, can be recovered easily as it is old, shared or common ground information between the speaker and hearer (Halliday and Greaves 2008). The other structure of the textual function imposes the structures of theme and rheme on the clause (Fries, 1995).

The theoretical concepts presented in this part will be partly used as criteria to analyze and interpret the data gathered.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were ten student -teachers who attended *Discurso Oral II* (DOII) in 2007 at Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata (UNMDP). DOII is a language development course with a strong pronunciation component taught in year 2 at the Teacher Training Program, UNMDP, Argentina. The average age of these students is 25. In this group, there were two males and eight females. I designed and administered the instrument for data collection, transcribed, analyzed and interpreted the findings. Another teacher-researcher listened to the transcriptions to cross-check them. In case there were mismatches in the data transcribed, the two experts listened to the recordings again to come to an agreement.

The collaborative task

The students were paired with a partner and recorded in a dyadic interaction task using English. They had to imagine that they had won a lot of money. They were given 60 seconds to look at five pictures of a house on a beach, a group of poor people, a brand-new car, a research laboratory, and people travelling on a plane. They were asked to talk to each other and decide which *three* things they would spend their money on and why. They were allotted 3 minutes to talk to each other and record their conversations on tape.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The aim of having students complete a dyadic interactive task was chiefly to explore how, through the use of language and their ideas and beliefs, these learners managed to construe their social reality.

The first step was to identify the names of those items chosen by each participant. Table 1 below shows the selection that these learners, grouped in five pairs, made of the three items they



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

chose. These items were ranked in order of importance (Ranked 1st, 2nd, and 3rd). Two learners (D and H), however, came up with two new categories: *save* and *invest* their money, respectively.

These items had not been part of the listed options. Therefore, they had to be disregarded.

	Pair 1		Pair 2		Pair 3		Pair 4		Pair 5	
Stds.	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Item 1 (Ranked 1 st .)	Car	travel	house	car	car	car	charity	(<i>invest</i>)	car	car
Item 2 (Ranked 2 nd)	House	travel	charity	(<i>save</i>)	travel	house	house	house	travel	travel
Item 3 (Ranked 3 rd)	Charity	charity	car	travel	charity	travel	charity	car	house	charity

Table 1. Selected items by the students in order of importance

Next, an analysis of the frequency with which these items appeared in their conversations was conducted. Table 2 below shows the frequency of occurrence of these items in their dialogues disregarding the order of the importance given to them by the students.

Items	Travel	Charity	Car	House	Research lab.
Freq. of occurrence	7	7	8	6	0

Table 2. Frequency of occurrence of items disregarding their order of importance

Table 2 shows that the item *car* was referred to by the majority of these learners (80%) disregarding the order of importance in which it appeared in their conversations. *Travel* and *charity* were mentioned equally by 70% of the participants, while *housing* was chosen by 60% of the students. The item *research laboratory* was overlooked by all the participants.

From a sociological perspective, the degree to which people perceive a need is clearly related to two important factors: their past experience, and the experience of groups to which they compare themselves. These factors create reference points and reference groups, taking into account which people evaluate their own well-being and state of need. The need to possess these items or participate in certain social activities (*charity*, for instance), can be seen as very much a social behaviour.



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

In the case of past experiences, consumers compare their current state to some situation in the past when they consider they were better, or a situation they would consider to be better in the future. Therefore, their desire to move backwards or forwards to that better state is aroused. On the other hand, reference groups are particular groups of people who influence the behaviour of potential consumers, because the consumers compare themselves with them in search for a social identity. Membership groups are groups to which people belong, such as families, groups of co-workers, and student communities, as might be the case with this group of students. Membership groups are important sources of information and also sources of pressure to conform to group practices and norms.

Another kind of reference group is the aspirational group. This is a group to which consumers wish they could belong. People often buy, dress, and behave like this aspirational group with whom they would like to identify socially (Goodwin, 2007). In view of these assumptions, then, it could be fair to say that these learners might have chosen these items at the expense of others to satisfy their own needs or desires, or as Gee (1999, 2002) puts it, to conform to certain social norms and practices which will allow them to be recognized as members of a given group.

The next step consisted in identifying the items ranked in order of importance as selected by these students. The results obtained are displayed in Table 3 below:

Frequency of occurrence in order of importance	Travel	Charity	Car	House	Research lab.
1 st ranked	1	1	6	1	0
2 nd ranked	4	1	0	4	0
3 rd ranked	2	5	2	1	0

Table 3. *Frequency of occurrence of items selected according to their importance*

Table 3 shows that the item ranked first by the majority of the students (60%) was the *car*. *Traveling* and *housing* were evenly ranked second in order of importance, reaching 40% each respectively. 50% of the students, on the other hand, chose *charity* as third. There seems to be individual motivations and social influences which may contribute to determine why people want what they want.



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

The samples below drawn from students I, E and F (see Table 1 above) will be analyzed to illustrate how individual motivation and social influence can be made visible through the use of language in conversational speech. These students picked the *car* as their first choice:

Extract 1:

Student I: Hello, go with me? If I got a lot of money, I would like to buy a new car, buy a car because I don't have one now, so that I can travel to university every day, because if not, I have to take a bus and I hate it.

On analyzing one specific unit taken from this extract some interesting inferences can be made:

Extract 2:

// If I got a ↗ lot of money / I would like to buy a new ↘ CAR //

The first grammatical or phonological unit (see Extract 2 above) shows a division of the utterance into topic (theme) and comment (rheme). By using a rising tone on the first part of this unit, the speaker backgrounds all this chunk, thus treating this piece of information as *given*. The use of this type of tone serves to anticipate, among other *phonopragmatic* functions, that something else is to come or rather this same speaker is inviting the listener to join in this conversation. The second part, however, is foregrounded or brought into focus by placing the nuclear falling tone on the word *car*. This choice signals her first choice made, and thus the culmination of *new* information.

The inclusion of the word *new*, pre-modifying the word *car* in this context may indicate that this speaker might not be content with just buying *any* type of car. Her desire to have a brand-new car, for instance, could be part of her individual motivation or else a desire to belong to an elite group which possesses new cars.

However, on analyzing the next segments, this inference is ostensibly cancelled out:

Extract 3:

/ buy a car / because I don't have one now / so that I can travel to university every day / because if not/ I have to take a bus / and I hate it//

The first chunk *buy a car* followed by the reason why this learner desires to possess a car (introduced by the coordinating conjunction *because*), indicates a conjunctive relation through which she denotes that she would like to have any type of vehicle, not necessarily a brand-new car (Fairclough, 2003). The next clause introduced by the resultative *so*, a discourse marker that evokes



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

another conjunctive relation and a conversational mode of narrative (McCarthy and Carter, 2001), confirms her desire to go to university on her own car as she hates traveling by bus. Although the public transportation system in Argentina is fairly efficient, traveling by bus can oftentimes become extremely time-consuming and costly. This may explain why she said she hates traveling by bus. In view of this, it can be inferred that this person was pushed to choose the car as the first item as a result of having had an individual motivation rather than being influenced by any given aspirational group.

The following exchange shows part of a conversation held by another two female students: E and F, who also chose the *car* as their first element in order of importance.

Extract 4:

Student F: ...Well, I don't know. In what would you spend your money if you have a lot?

Student E: First, I would like to buy a car.

Student F: Yes, me too.

Student E: A black car.

Student F: a black car?

Student E: Yes, black.

Student F: A very nice car? Would you like to have a car?

Student E: Yes, I'd really like to have a car. Ah... my favorite car is a Rolls Royce Phantom. And I would like to have that car. I don't know if I can buy that car in Argentina, but I'd like to have that car.

Thematic analysis can be used to establish the relative coherence of a text and to show how paragraphs can be organized across sentence boundaries by means of patterns of theme (topic) (and rheme or comment) development (Halliday, 1985). The treatment of thematic development allows the researcher to make interesting distinctions between assorted types of texts, and to differentiate between spoken and written discourse. Theme can be equated with the first position in a clause or sentence, underlying that this position is not automatically identifiable with the grammatical subject of a sentence. Interactional thematization -in which items such as *I* and *we* are placed in first position- is usually associated with conversational speech. Topic-based thematization -in which pieces of information are ordered- is more usually associated with written texts (Halliday, 1985; Halliday and Matthiensen, 1994; Fairclough, 2003).



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

Student E above showed that she mostly made use of the first type of theme (interactional), as she continuously thematized herself, not only as a participant in the event of buying a car but also as an evaluator of it where she is reporting her thoughts, feelings and reactions. Her constant use of the interactional theme corroborates that this piece of discourse belongs to the spoken mode. A balance of theme and rheme between speakers in ordinary conversation is a sign of truly encounter, of the creation of cohesion, fluidity, conversational well-being and interactivity (McCarthy and Carter, 2001). However, if one speaker persistently inserts new themes, as is this case, she may be heard and perceived as dominant, hostile and even somewhat aggressive.

Speaker E's motivation to buy a *car*, as her first option, might have been driven by a strong desire to feel socially identified with an aspirational group. There are a number of semantic relations that may contribute to corroborate this assumption. First, she chose *black* as *the* color for her new car, and she did it twice.

Extract 5:

(i) / A BLACK car /
 ↘
 (ii) / Yes, ↘ BLACK /

From a phonological-discursive perspective, on both occasions the speaker placed a falling nuclear tone on the word *black*¹. Falling tones are generally used to provide *new* information, and they imply that the message being conveyed is complete and definitive. In (i), for instance, a high-pitched falling tone indicates that this piece of information is contrastive. That is, this speaker wants her car to be *black* as opposed to red, blue or any other color. In (ii), for example, by using of a low-pitched non-rising tone, this learner sounds somewhat categorical, detached and, perhaps, a bit hostile (Wells, 2006). If this were so, then, this interpretation correlates with the effect of dominance and hostility created by the overuse of the interactional theme mentioned above. From a more sociological standpoint, for the last few years, at least in Argentina, owing a black car has been a social symbol for prestige and high status. That means that if someone owns a *black car*, they behave like their aspirational group. Therefore, those who buy a *black car* then, may feel that they belong to and feel identified with a given social elite. In the next sample, this participant provides the brand of the car she wishes to have:

Extract 6:

¹ Tonic syllables are shown in UPPER CASE letters, and pitch movement is indicated by falling arrows showing pitch direction.



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

/ Ah...my  FAVORITE car / is a Rolls Royce  Phantom /

By building this semantic relation, she reinforces the assumption made at the beginning, where it was said that her strong desire to buy this particularly new car could possibly have been triggered off by a social need to belong to a given group rather than by her own individual motivation and personal need to possess a vehicle. In the next sample, the use of the demonstrative *that* is analyzed:

Extract 7:

/ And I would like to have *that* car. I don't know if I can buy *that* car in Argentina, but I'd like to have *that* car //

The recurrent use of the demonstrative *that* (grammatical relation) in the utterance above contributes to *topicalize* the entity under discussion: *A black Rolls Royce Phantom*, the type of car that this student wishes to have. Demonstratives, as used in this case, continue topics already brought about in the conversation to the status of current focus and contribute to reinforce, as Fairclough (2003) would put it, an *existential assumption*.

It is interesting to note how language is influenced by relationships between participants in a given context. The modern consumer is not an isolated individual making purchases in a vacuum. Rather, we are all participants in a contemporary phenomenon that has often been called a consumerist culture and a consumer society. To say that some people have consumerist attitudes or values means that they always want to consume more, and that they find meaning and satisfaction in life, to a large extent, through the purchase of new and expensive goods, as might be the case with this last student teacher.

The second two items chosen in order of importance by this group of students were *traveling* and *house*. Most of these students claimed that they would like to spend their money on traveling and living in an English-speaking country. One interpretation of this could be that since these students will be prospective English language teachers, they long for or feel the need to be immersed in an English speaking community where they will have the possibility of getting to know the foreign culture and practice the target language. With regard to this, two female students pointed out:

Extract 8:

Then, I think I would like to ... travel to...an English country such as... I don't know... England, or the USA...We need that!



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

I'd like to buy a plane to travel to many places around the world because one of my hobbies is traveling and I would like to live in England, for example. To learn to speak English well.

Although two other students also referred to traveling and housing, they both associated these items with independence and freedom. They said:

Extract 9:

/ I would like to travel to a desert island because nobody could bother me there, and I also would like to have my own house, so that I can become more independent and have more freedom //

/ The fact is that I don't know ... I would like to live, I mean, in the beach, alone. Maybe I'd like to have my own house in another place, I mean, in a more central place.../

From a sociological viewpoint, although many young adults in Argentina are likely to live apart from their parents than with them, they are staying longer in their parental home before moving out. In Argentina, this social trend may take root in the financial problems that this country has been going through. Several studies carried out globally reveal that this phenomenon is affecting other parts of the world as well. From a lexical-grammatical perspective, both speakers made use of different modal verb choices: *would*, *could*, and *can*. These verb choices contribute to convey a sense of desire, promise and potential, which is necessary to the act of persuasion central to these students' idea of having their own house to live apart from their parents. Second, lexical choices may also be used to reinforce a given message. See the samples below:

Extract 10:

/...nobody could *bother* me.../

/... mean, in the beach *alone*.... /

Vocabulary items such as *bother* and *alone* help to strengthen the notion that these students are not living alone. They might be willing and eager to have their own house. This can be inferred from the hefty semantic load of these words (*bother/alone*).

Charity was chosen third in order of importance. They might have felt the need to construe a social image, a symbolic capital, in the eyes of their partners so as not to look too altruistic and egotistical in front of them. Entering the charity field, means associating with notions of care and benevolence, making the others appear as humane and morally upstanding members of a given community. *Charity* can be seen as a vital means of acquiring or reinforcing someone's symbolic capital and social position, and that might have been what these students were seeking for when they picked this item. The last comment made by Student E below illustrates this assumption:

Extract 11:



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

Student E: Yes, that would be nice. And maybe I think that it is also important to give some money, some money to charity.

Student F: yes, yes...

Student E: It makes you feel better and probably makes you a better person.

By bringing into focus /...*feel better*/, this learner highlights her need to satisfy her own personal longing rather than a true desire to involve herself in charitable work. She could have used the proposition /*makes you a better person*/ to expand her initial idea of feeling better by means of doing charitable work. If this were the case, she would be reinforcing her need for self-development. However, she could also have meant that doing charitable work would allow her to become a better person, that is, more humane and benevolent in the eyes of a third party. Through charitable work she would be able to acquire or reinforce her symbolic capital and social status.

Charity is closely related to poverty. If a household is unable to obtain minimal nutrition, shelter, clothing, education, health care and sanitation for its members, most people would agree that it is deprived of the necessities of life. These students might have chosen *charity* as one possible option because by sharing their money, they would be able to provide financial support and assistance to the poor.

DISCUSSION

Although the results obtained in this study yielded interesting information about how, through the use of language, a group of ten student teachers in Argentina build up their social reality, some observations can be made. Originally, the number of participant in this study was eighteen students. Unfortunately, the day the collaborative task was done, only twelve turned up. On top of this, in the process of digitalizing the speech data, one of these recordings was damaged and had to be discarded. Ideally, a greater recorded speech data should have been collected. Designing the task, having the students record it on tape, digitalizing and transcribing the speech data turned out to be extremely time-consuming activities.

To further validate these findings, in 2011, Luchini carried out a similar study with another group of pre-service teachers with similar characteristics to those deployed by these learners. The data coming from this other group of seventeen trainees was collected in 2009. At that time, these other group of students were enrolled in a Teacher Training Program at IDRA, Instituto Superior, in



Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

Mar del Plata, Argentina. These trainees were asked to complete a task sheet individually where they had to rank, in order of importance, the same five items used in this study. The results obtained provided a preliminary overview of how these learners used language to shape their social reality.

Surprisingly, the item *car*, which was ranked first by DOII students, was totally disregarded by the other group. *Traveling* was ranked second in order of importance by DOII students and first by the other group of learners. *Housing* was chosen second by both groups. Almost all students equally assigned considerable importance to these two last items in their contexts. As regards *charity*, both groups ranked this item third in order of importance. Unexpectedly, the lowest score was given to *research laboratory*. This indicates a strong preference for these two groups to satisfy first other personal interests rather than doing research.

CONCLUSION

This case study consisted in the exploration of how, through the use of language, a group of student teachers in Argentina construed their social reality. The findings yielded interesting information that will, hopefully, allow the reader to comprehend how some people can accomplish certain communicative goals and, in so doing, show who they are and how they want others to perceive them through the use of language. However, this process of being socially recognized also involves acting, interacting, thinking, valuing and talking in appropriate ways, at the right time, and at the proper place. To expand the results obtained here and thus further validate these findings, additional research in the field of spoken discourse analysis should be conducted.

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Investigating how learners in Argentina construe their social reality through the use of language by Pedro Luis Luchini

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