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# **Social Issues in Applied Linguistics: Linguistic Diversity in the Classroom and Beyond. Is it Wrong or Just Different? Indigenous Spanish in Mexico**

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Varieties of L2 language use are frequently rejected and criticized in the absence of linguistic criteria to sustain such attitudes. In Mexico, indigenous varieties of Spanish, the second language (L2) of diverse populations, has been stigmatized as uneducated Spanish. A majority of elementary school teachers interviewed, who are Spanish first language (L1) speakers, maintain that particular variations in accent and pronunciation as well as some grammatical variations are characteristic of indigenous population that lack school training. I have argued that these L1 language attitudes focus the attention on what these L2 speakers do not master, neglecting all the discursive strategies that they master successfully in their everyday communications with native Spanish speakers. The aim of this paper is to show, from a sociolinguistic point of view, how a group of indigenous women who have acquired Spanish L2 in intense but informal contact with Spanish L1 speakers are able to participate successfully in conversational personal storytelling. The study of language strategies developed in the context of informal social interactions, offers evidence of the sort of L2 competences that may be acquired without formal instruction. These competences do not deserve stigma; rather they may offer ideas to educators for improving those discursive strategies used by students in formal L2 classrooms.

## **Introduction**

In the following pages I will focus on the narrative strategies indigenous speakers use to build accounts of their life experiences, creating interest and maintaining the attention of their audience in Spanish, their second language (L2). Narrative strategies are concerned with the handling of discourse and communicative interaction through the multiple levels of a personal story: (a) that of past experience, (b) that of narrated experience and (c) that of performed experience. I will focus here on two main strategies that often stand out in storytelling: *reported speech* and *repetition*. They both derive from theories on *performance* treated as an act of communication with an expressive function central in the telling of stories (Tannen, 2007; Thornborrow & Coates, 2005). Performance is also defined as an interpretative frame, which incorporates, among others, quotations and imitations characteristic of reported speech. Bauman (1993) has offered accounts of how the storyteller recreating the words spoken by the participants in a story enhances and evidences his own role and his points of view. By the same token, when quoting the direct speech of a character in the story the storyteller offers evidence about

the source of the quotation as well as about his own commitment with the words transmitted (Aikhenvald, 2004). Reported speech involves complex communicative strategies because the storyteller speaks for another person in the past event and performs both the third party and his/her own self in the present of the narrative event. In this double play narrative quotations such as *dice* “he/she says” and *dice que* or *dicen que* “he/she says that or it is said that” function as indicators of different degrees of *evidentiality*.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, repetition of words and phrases is a common strategy that enables a speaker to produce new information fluently (Tannen, 2007). Repetition of words and phrases is frequently used in oral narratives and may lead to parallel repetitions known as *parallelisms*, which involve systematic variation of language units giving a poetic rhythm to chunks of the oral narrative (Bauman, 1977). Repetition also intensifies the dramatic effects of personal experiences, highlighting the main point of the event that is being performed by the storyteller (Norrick, 2000).

In a moment of educational and political debate over African American English, Labov (1972, 1997) demonstrated the particular logic and grammar strategies of what he defined as Black English Vernacular (BEV). Labov offered a framework for the definition and analysis of personal event narratives told in natural situations. For decades this framework has been a model used for describing and analyzing the textual and syntactic structure of narratives. Although his data was elicited by a question concerning situations of danger, his sociolinguistic approach as well as his analytical model has proved adequate in accounting for the diversity of linguistic and discursive forms. It is also consistent with other work that examines conversational narratives created by speakers in contact with two languages (Silva-Corvalán, 1994).

Given the aim of this paper I have adopted an eclectic framework that draws from Labov’s analysis of structure, evaluative functions, and narrative strategies used by marginalized storytellers.

### **Data Source**

The data for this paper were recorded within the string of everyday conversations with female adult members of two Mazahua families who migrated to Mexico City seeking financial sustainability. Their mother tongue (L1) is spoken in the northeast and southeast of the Mexican state of Michoacan. In that region, Mazahua contact with Spanish started informally in their villages of origin where bilingualism increased remarkably in the last century. In the urban context of Mexico City, these Mazahua speakers interact on a daily basis with other speakers of Spanish in work environments. Their L2, which I will refer to as Mazahua-Spanish, has been enriched in the urban context of Mexico City where indigenous immigrant workers have to accomplish multiple L2 communicative tasks in their daily interaction with native Spanish speakers.

Two narrative fragments – 161 and 135 words in length - are analyzed here. The storytellers, Virginia (V), 45 years old, and Juanita (J), 47 years old, have both been living in Mexico City for nearly 30 years. They are representative members of two different female labor groups indicated in Table 1.

Table 1.  
*Two Mazahua Women Labor Groups*

Storyteller	Age	School training	Job
A	40	None	Household helpers
F	38	two years	“
M	43	None	“
P	38	one year	“
V	45	None	“
B	45	None	Street vendors
C	37	one year	“
H	39	one year	“
I	37	None	“
J	47	None	“

Virginia and her cousins have worked as household help for middle class families since they arrived to Mexico City. Their frequent interaction with Spanish speakers provides and demands a constant use of this language. Juanita embroiders traditional Mazahua clothes and sells them on the city streets where she is in contact with colloquial styles of Spanish L1. Juanita’s family cohabitates with other Mazahua street vendors who gossip and tell stories in Mazahua as well as in Spanish.

**Data Analysis: Structural and Stylistic Features**

In the following pages narrative strategies – reported speech and repetition – will be analyzed according to the discursive functions they play in the development of storytelling. The linguistic features of the stories will be classified in two groups: (a) Colloquial Spanish that will enlist contractions, deletions, and confusions of sound or grammar units that are consistent with other varieties of spoken Spanish, sometimes categorized as *nonstandard*.; and (b) Indigenous Spanish that includes phonological (sound) and grammatical features that may not appear as frequently in the spoken varieties of native-Spanish speakers.<sup>2</sup> In the analysis of the following narratives, I draw special attention to strategies used by Virginia and Juanita for rebuilding a past event in the form of a narrative discourse, and on the other hand, to the features of the Spanish L2 that they use in their narratives.

### Virginia's Story

Following a visit to her home village, Virginia relates the troubles with her niece Lupe, who was supposed to take care of her elderly mother. The first of the five sequences in the narrative opens with three clauses (1-3), which offer information about the characters in the story as well as the time and place in which the event occurred. At the same time the repetition of negatives *...no tenía agua, no tenía comida...* "...*(she) did not have water, did not have food...*" (2-3) emphasizes the fact that things for Virginia's mother are not happening as Virginia would prefer:

#### *First sequence:*

1. Ese día llegué a ver a mi mamá y Lupe *no'staba*.  
'That day I went to see my mom and Lupe wasn't there.'
2. Y mi mamá no tenía agua, no tenía comida, no tenía gas,  
'And my mom did not have water, did not have food, did not have gas,'
3. ni con que calentarse un, una taza de agua, allí.  
not even something to warm a, a cup of water there.'

In the second sequence (4-5) Virginia introduces her role in the story: she is the one who tends to the elderly mother. The repetition of the past imperfect in (4): *Y le dejaba yo, le dejaba...* "And I used to leave her, to leave her..." puts the emphasis on her habitual repeated action of leaving money. The shift to present tense, together with the contrastive parallelism *Come poco, no come mucho...* "[She] eats a little, she doesn't eat much..." contribute in (5) to the idea that she supplies more than sufficient money (4):

#### *Second sequence:*

4. Y le dejaba yo, le dejaba [a Lupe] ciento cincuenta [pesos]  
'And I used to leave her, to leave her [to Lupe] one hundred fifty [pesos]
- 4.1 para que comiera mi mamá.  
so my mom would eat'.
5. Come poco, no come mucho mi mamá.  
'[She] eats a little, she doesn't eat much, my mom.'

In the third sequence (6-8) the use of a double negative *ni tampoco* "wouldn't either" (6) is reinforced by the Spanish past imperfect verb form and the rhythmical parallelisms *No lo atendía, no lo bañaba, no le lavaba...* "[She] didn't tend to..., didn't bathe her..., didn't wash her..." (7). Both strategies intensify the negative habitual aspect of these actions, drawing attention to how Virginia was displeased

with what Lupe's did not do. Finally, Virginia points to the consequence of Lupe's behavior with a declarative and definite statement: *Me dio mucho coraje* "It made me very upset" (8):

*Third sequence:*

6. [Lupe] se gastó el dinero y *ni tampoco* le compraba comida a mi mamá.  
'[Lupe] spent the money and [she] wouldn't buy food for my mom, either.'

7. *No lo atendía, no lo bañaba, no le lavaba la ropa.*  
'[She] didn't tend to her, she didn't bathe her, didn't wash her clothes.'

8. *Me dio mucho coraje.*  
'It made me very upset.'

The fourth sequence marks the beginning of a new episode (9): *Y luego [entonces]...* "And then...", which Labov (1997: 402) interprets as a response to a potential question from the storyteller's interlocutor: "And then what happened?". In fact Virginia offers an answer to that potential question with the declarative statement: ... *me pelié con ella* "...I quarreled with her" (10):

*Fourth sequence:*

9. *Y luego [entonces] yo fui un día domingo,*  
'And then one Sunday, I went there,

10. *y ya me pelié con ella.*  
and I quarreled with her.'

The fifth sequence (11-11.4) is the heart of the story. Virginia opens it up to the evaluation of the listeners, so that listeners praise her and blame Lupe. To this end, she uses four strategies that underline her supporter role in contrast to Lupe's unreliable conduct: a) she transforms the announced quarrel (10) into a reprimand, emphasizing the negative: *No pus, nomás...* "No well, I just ...". without using aggressive words (11); b) she uses reported speech (11.1-11.4) to quote and evaluate herself; c) she supports evidence of her performance by transferring the quotation frame *yo digo* "I say" to final position in the clauses (11.1, 11.4) and d) she uses parallel structures: *que, yo te traje... que yo te doy...* "that I brought you...that I gave you..." (11.2, 11.3). The story comes to an end when the recipient of the reprimand leaves (12). Resuming this corollary, Virginia addresses a direct question to her audience *¿Se imagina usted?* "Can you imagine? Which is a common conversational phrase used to obtain a shared opinion (13). In this case it seems that she is trying to imply that Lupe deserved a heated quarrel rather than just a reprimand.

*Fifth sequence:*

11 No *pus*, *nomás* le dije

‘No well, I just told her’

11.1 “¿Cómo va ser posible?”, le digo

“‘How will that be possible?’ I said’

11.2 “que, yo te traje *pacá*,

“‘that, I brought you over here,’

11.3 que yo te doy ciento cincuenta

‘that, I gave you one hundred and fifty’

11.4 *paque* atendieras mi mamá”, le digo.

‘so that you would take care of my mom”, I said..’

12 Y se largó así *nomás*,

‘And she left, just like that,’

13 ¿Se imagina *usté*?

‘Can you imagine?’

Although Virginia’s speech is framed by intonation particular to Mazahua, most of the non-standard features she uses are in fact commonly used by native Spanish speakers. Among them are elisions and contractions: *no ’staba* “wasn’t” (1), *nomás* “no more” (11), (see also 11.2, 11.4, 12,13), as well as the use of diphthongs like *pelié* (10). Only two grammatical features are frequently used in Mazahua-Spanish: an object pronoun unmarked for gender *...lo atendía* “...tend to it” (7) and the absence of preposition *a* “to” in *atendieras (a) mi mamá* “[to] my mother” which is obligatory in Spanish when the complement of the verb is a person.

Virginia interacts mainly, although not only, within three social networks: (a) the middle class family she works for, (b) her Mazahua relatives who have also migrated to the city and who have shifted to using Spanish in their conversations, and (c) other speakers of Spanish who live in a low-income community with little school education. Virginia’s narrative presents features of the Spanish used within these three social networks. Like other members in her migrant group (Table 1) this knowledge has allowed her to keep a place in the city’s labor market.

### **Juanita’s Story**

While embroidering with a group of needlewomen Juanita chit-chats about everyday events. In this intimate context with her peers, Juanita is asked to tell the story of the accident suffered by her thirteen-year-old son. A fragment of this story is examined below.

In the first sequence a new participant is introduced, and through this strategy she prefaces a change in events that are being narrated: ...*tonces, viene una vecina ...* "then a neighbor comes..." (1) The speech turns in this sequence (1.1-1.3) are marked by reported speech phrases: *dijo, dice, dije* "she said, she says, I said". The changes in tense and person are used to indicate who is who in the event to come. In the first two clauses, Juanita introduces a character who enters the narrative by commanding (1.1, 1.2). Nevertheless this character receives a negative answer from Juanita (1.3) who quotes herself offering evidence that she did not play an active role in the "matches affair."

#### *First sequence*

1 ... *tonces, viene una vecina,*  
'...then a neighbor comes'

1.1 me dijo "Tía/ *traite el cerío*",  
'she said "Auntie... bring a match"',

1.2 dice "vamos a prender un plato con tantito alcohol, con ceboya."  
'she says, "we're going to light with a plate with some alcohol and onion."'

1.3 Luego le dije yo "Noo, pero no tengo *cerío* (cerillo) Mari".  
'Then I told her "Noo, but I don't have any matches Mari".'

In the second sequence Juanita uses the discourse marker *pero* "but" which signals a rupture with the assertive tone of the first sequence. Here, the storyteller is not in possession of the complete evidence of the information she is offering. This fact is hinted at by the choice of the verb and its repetition followed by hesitation markers *yo, cro'ste...yo cro'ste* "I, guess, uh, I, guess, uh" (2). All over this sequence Juanita's character is highlighted by the repetition of the first person pronoun *yo* "I" in a series of parallelisms: ... *tonce yo no... di cuenta...* "...then I didn't realize..." (2.1); *tonce yo fui ...afuera* "then I went... out there" (2.2), such that she denies all direct responsibility to the point that she physically removes herself from the scenario.

#### *Second sequence*

2. Pero yo, *cro'ste*, (creo este) yo, *cro'ste* (creo este) fue a traer *cerío* (cerillo)  
[a] su casa  
'But I, guess, uh, I guess, uh she went to bring matches to her house

2.1 porque ya *tonce, yo no di cuenta*, señorita  
because then, I didn't realize, miss



2.2 *tonce yo fui [a] traer un pañal afuera, un trapo afuera.*

then I went to get a diaper from outside, a cloth out there.'

The third sequence corresponds to the outcome of the story, announced with an expressive discourse maker: *¡Cuando veo! yo* "When I see!!" (3). Here Juanita is again using the personal pronoun *yo* "I" in the final position, intensifying its evaluative function, since it is not obligatory in Spanish. She then supports her performance using a succession of narrative strategies: a) a shift to present tense (3, 3.1), which emphasizes an abrupt rupture with the preceding past tenses used in her narrative; b) a string of descriptive visual scenes enhanced through parallelisms (3.1), demonstrative words (3.3, 3.4), repetitions and vowel lengthening (3.2, 3.4, 3.5), and gestures (3.3, 3.4). All these strategies contribute to create a dramatic ending of this fragment of her story.

*Third sequence:*

3 *¡Cuando veo! yo*

'When I see!!'

3.1 *ya la l'abre la puerta, ya va saliendo pa' juera el chamaco.*

'He's already opening the door, the kid's already on his way out.'

3.2 *¡¡Tooodo!! La llamarada de lumbre!!*

'Eeeeverything! The flares of fire!!'

3.3 *Como le de... de, de, qiaa aqué [gesto], la cabeza.*

'Like he from...from... , from here to there [gesture] the head.'

3.4 *Toodo esto [gesto] se le quemó, todo el cabello, ¡toodo! todo!*

'Aaall of this [gesture] got burned, all of his hair, all of it!! all of it!!'

3.5 *La ceeja! todo se le quemó.*

'His eyebrows! Everything was burnt !!'

Juanita maintains the attention and interest of her audience when she tells a personal experience story and transmits human emotions through performance in Spanish. She uses contractions and phonological (sound) deletions characteristic of oral Spanish, which do not follow standard written Spanish such as: *tonces, tonce* instead of *entonces* "then" (1, 2.1, 2.2). Her narrative also exhibits some features which are rarely used in urban Spanish by native speakers such as: *traite* instead of *tráete* "bring"(1.1) and *cerío* instead of *cerillo* "match", (1.1, 1.3, 2). She does not use the Spanish reflexive pronoun 'me', *yo no (me) di cuenta...* "I wasn't aware..." (2.1) and does not always use the preposition 'a', *fue a traer cerío (a) su casa* "(she) went to her house to get matches"(2). It is also noted that she does not produce

Spanish routines that accompany gestures like: *de, qia aqué* (de aquí a acá) “from here to there” (3.3). One must take into consideration that Juanita’s story is highly dramatized and thus highlighting dramatic moments is prioritized over prescriptive grammar in her L2. On the whole she is able to construct interesting and dynamic personal narratives making innovative use of a variety of language strategies.

## Results

Both Virginia and Juanita’s narrative strategies and their functions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2.

### *Narrative Strategies*

Strategy	Function	Virginia	Total	Juanita	Total
Reported Speech	Evaluates / evidences	(11.1,11.2,11.3 11.4)	2	(1.1, 1.2, 1.3)	3
Repetition	Intensifies	(1, 2, 3, 4, 5)	5	(2, 3.2, 3.4, 3.5)	4
Parallellism	Emphatic poetic feature	(5, 7, 11.2, 11.3)	4		5
Past/present shift	Emphasizes / evidences	(5, 11.1, 11.3)	3	(3, 3.1)	2
Negative	Compares / evaluates	(1, 2, 3, 6)	4	(2.2)	1
Vowel elongation	Intensifies			(3.2, 3.4, 3.5)	3
Total			18		18

One may observe that both Mazahua storytellers, possess the necessary competences to perform engaging narratives. They are both loquacious and good storytellers. Even though Juanita displays more variety than Virginia in terms of narrative strategies, this does not interfere with her narrative competence and she is perfectly capable of recounting her son’s accident in Spanish. Paradoxically, these competences are rarely taken into consideration by native-Spanish speakers when assessing other varieties of spoken Spanish. Furthermore, it is an ideology of *uneducated Spanish* associated with non-standard language criteria that prevails in the (un)appreciation of indigenous immigrants’ Spanish.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the narratives above demonstrates the competences that Mazahua-Spanish speakers display when using a L2 acquired via informal oral contact with native Spanish speakers. The purpose of this paper has been to show that using parameters such as ‘uneducated’ or ‘nonstandard’ are not sufficient to

evaluate Mazahua's knowledge of Spanish. One must approach the actual contexts and situations where speakers spontaneously use their L2 in order to appreciate what they put into work to accomplish the communicative tasks of their everyday life. Narrating is one of those tasks because it is an important part of social and cultural identity. Therefore, narrators make the best use of their sociocultural knowledge to narrate experiences that are part of shared identities with their peers.

### Notes

1. The term *evidentiality* in the present text makes reference to the rapport of the storyteller with the participants that are being quoted in the narrative (Aikhenvald, 2004).
2. Among others, Silva-Corvalán (1992) explains the process of simplification in Spanish-English language contact.

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