JOINING FORCES IN CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN SPANISH L2 CONVERSATIONS

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Abstract. This study explores how *Spanish L2* speakers *negotiate* and *construct meaning* in *conversation*. Data come from audio recordings of pair conversations between 12 intermediate learners of Spanish. The analysis reveals that participants focus their interaction primarily on *meaning* and, do so by assisting each other in creating meaning and thus, making input comprehensible. Focus on *form* repair is not relevant during conversation.

Keywords: Language acquisition, L2 conversation, meaning construction, meaning negotiation.

1. Background

The crucial role of interaction in language acquisition is unquestionable (see Mackey, 2007 for a thorough review of research). When learners engage in interaction, communication breakdowns arise which lead to meaning negotiations. These interactional adjustments take place to overcome comprehension difficulties. More precisely, exchanges of this kind involve "the modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility. As they negotiate, "they work linguistically to achieve the needed comprehensibility, whether repeating a message verbatim, adjusting its syntax, changing its words, or modifying its form and meaning in a host of other ways" (Pica 1994: 494). These negotiations offer negative evidence about the individual's output pushing them to make language more comprehensible and/or target-like. It is during output that learners test their hypothesis about language and receive feedback from their interlocutors pushing them to produce more precise language. During negotiated sequences learners use metalanguage to process syntactic information which leads them to modified output and ultimately language acquisition (Lightbown and Spada 2006, Mackey 2007, Ortega 2009, Swain 2005).

The three most common strategies used to signal a negotiation move include *comprehension checks,* expressions designed to establish whether the speaker's own preceding utterance has been understood by the addressee (e.g. 'Do you understand?'), *clarification requests*, expressions that elicit clarification of the preceding utterance (e.g. 'I beg your pardon?'), *confirmation check*, utterances following the preceding speaker's utterance intended to confirm that the utterance was understood or heard correctly (e.g. 'A: She lived in the lock. B: In the lock?') and *recasts* utterances that rephrase what has been said (Long 1983, Foster 1998, Nicholas, Lightbown and Spada 2001). Long (1996: 418) added that recasts rephrase another utterance "by changing one or more of its sentence components (subject, verb, or object) while still referring to its central meaning". In addition, recasts usually take place in classroom settings often initiated by a native speaker or teacher who directs student's attention to a language form regardless of whether communication breakdown has taken place.

Comprehension checks usually serve to head off potential communication breakdowns whereas the remaining strategies are often employed to address problems that have already arisen and, when the negotiation work is successful, allow the interaction to proceed. In addition,

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the ensuing exchanges often result in modified input, which has been adjusted to facilitate comprehension, or modified output, which closer approximates the TL norm (Ellis 1999). However, a closer look at interaction shows that these commonly used strategies to describe meaning negotiations are not always indicative of communication breakdowns and in fact, they may be used to encourage talk among participants. Foster and Ohta (2005: 413) provide the following example where what seems to be confirmation checks (D2, C3) are turns to allow time to think what to say next and to invite continuation to speak.

C1: What do you like in London?
D2: London? (1.0) Ah, there are a lot of things to do here
C3: A lot?
D4: there are a lot of things to do in your free time. A lot of shops, and you can go bowling, skating (1.0) there are cinemas. Where I live, no.

Foster and Ohta (2005) point out that traditionally studies in language interaction have placed emphasis on how to identify the form that constitutes a meaning negotiation marker but have failed in explaining its function, as shown in the example above. It is then crucial to analyze fully contextualized language episodes to help identify the function of strategies such as clarification requests and confirmation checks, which are the most challenging to distinguish as markers of negotiation of meaning. The question remains if episodes where conversational strategies as illustrated in the example above, used to encourage conversation can be beneficial to language acquisition, as claimed for strategies requesting clarification or confirmation during a communication breakdown (Foster and Ohta 2005).

Meaning negotiation sequences can also be face-threatening because learners must recognize a comprehension problem with the message. Therefore, "learners who partially understand, 'getting the gist' of what someone is saying, or who fear appearing to be pushy or a fool, may avoid interrupting to request clarification or repetition of things that are not entirely clear" (Foster and Ohta, 2005: 407). As we will see, this is often the case in interactions between non-native speakers who share the same native language. Research has also revealed that classroom activities that involve information gap tasks between two learners are likely to give most opportunities to negotiate meaning (see Pica 1994 for an overview). Consequently, much of the research in meaning negotiation sequence has involved information-gap tasks and/or classroom discourse, where the teacher initiates negotiation sequences. However, natural conversations also need to be studied to see how learners make adjustments to their output to make meaning comprehensible without having the pressure of completing a task or the teacher's focus on form repair as is often the case in classroom discourse. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how conversational partners make meaning together as they engage in spontaneous conversation.

2. Method

Twelve adult learners of Spanish as an L2, ten women and two men, recruited from a Spanish conversation college course in the United States served as participants. All participants were majoring or minoring in Spanish. Their level of Spanish oral proficiency was assessed by an oral proficiency interview performed at the end of the course by the teacher, who is a certified OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview) tester by the American Association of the Teaching of Foreign

Languages (ACTFL). All participants achieved Intermediate High or Advanced Low levels of proficiency as described by the ACTFL proficiency guidelines[1].

As part of the conversation class, students were placed in pairs and given topics for each week to talk about. They met outside the classroom and conversed for seven minutes approximately during five weeks, resulting in 35 minutes of talk for each pair of students with a total of 210 minutes of recorded data. Conversations were audio-recorded and submitted online to the teacher, who is also the researcher. The conversations were graded only on completion not on grammatical accuracy because the pedagogical goal was to help learners gain self-confidence and fluency in speaking Spanish as they freely converse with a partner without the pressure of being corrected or penalized for language mistakes.

Each of the conversations was transcribed and analyzed for negotiation sequences and episodes where participants cooperate to express meaning and succeed in communicating. The analysis follows a qualitative approach because the focus is on the adjustments that participants make in making meaning comprehensible not on the frequency of those adjustments. In order to recognize a meaning negotiation sequence, the prompt was first identified as a comprehension check, a confirmation check or a clarification request. The prompt had to be followed by a turn which clearly indicated that a breakdown in communication had been taken place. In order to observe which sequences involved assistance in constructing meaning, we looked at instances of *co-construction* where one participant completes what the other person has started or both participants join in creating an utterance; *other-correction* where one participant corrects the other's participant utterance; and *continuers,* similar to confirmation checks but offered to express interest and encourage talk (Foster and Ohta 2005)[2].

3. Results and Discussion

As expected, the data did not reveal many cases of meaning negotiation. This is not surprising since the task itself was not conducive to opportunities to negotiate meaning. In language tasks, especially information-gap activities, participants have a goal they need to achieve and therefore, the need to comprehend each other's message is imperative in order to accomplish the task goal. In natural conversations one may not totally understand what their interlocutor is saying and still the conversation may proceed. Other studies such as Foster (1998) and Foster and Ohta (2005) have obtained similar results. In only one instance in our data the participant requested clarification by asking *what* but the response received was a verbatim repetition of the previous utterance followed by an affirmative acknowledgement of comprehension, which implies the request was not based on non-understanding but on non-hearing.

The comprehension checks in the data had the form of a turn ended in rising intonation. These examples were often ambiguous because of the current tendency in conversational speech in American English to finish utterances in rising intonation especially among young speakers. However, some episodes were identified where the rising intonation was a sign to check whether the interlocutor had understood and/or a request for correction if needed as in example 1. Here the female speaker is narrating an incident that took place with a male student on campus.

[1] For a detailed description of the OPI and the ACTFL proficiency guidelines go to www. actfl.org.

[2] Foster and Ohta (2005) include self-correction in their analysis but since our focus is on peer-assistance, it was decided to exclude it from our analysis.

(1)	S1: *el otro dia estaba violenta con mi*↑	the other day he was violent with me
	S2: *mmhmm*	mmhmm
	S1: *sí y ahora estaba muy grande más grande*	yes, and now he was very big bigger than
	que mi pero después de este incidente se mudó	me but after this incident he moved

In this example, S1 follows a rising intonation and slows down as she finishes her utterance with *´violenta con mi´*. She checks that she has used the correct form and the interlocutor understood her. S2 offers a simple *mmhmm* with lowering intonation to indicate she has understood the utterance. S1 finishes the sequence by acknowledging that the message has been successfully grasped and then, she continues with the story. As seen here these utterances with rising intonation and pausing between words show the speaker´s struggle to express meaning but once the interlocutor acknowledges understanding, focus on the correct form is removed. In this particular example, the grammatical form would be *´conmigo´* but the interlocutor does not seem to either know the correct form or if she does, chooses not to offer the correction because meaning is clear.

The analysis of the data offered more evidence of participants given or receiving assistance than of communication breakdowns leading to meaning negotiation. The conversational nature of the task where participants spoke freely about certain topics and engaged in natural conversations interrupting, finishing each other utterances and/or using follow-up questions was conducive to collaboration and assistance. Only twice a participant corrected his partner. Once he corrected the gender of a word used and in the other, the same participant corrected an English word by offering its Spanish translation. In both cases, the partners did not request assistance but, nonetheless, they incorporated the new form into their responses.

Assistance was requested by participants when it dealt with vocabulary. Participants would stop in the middle of an utterance and ask of their interlocutor how to say a word in Spanish. Often the interlocutor would offer the Spanish word, which would be incorporated into the other interlocutor's turn or would be ignored because at that point meaning was clear and the speaker would choose to go on speaking. Sometimes, the request for assistance was not successful in producing the form requested, but once participants agreed on the intended meaning, the conversation would continue as in example 2.

(2)	S1: *yo estaba llevar llevé zapatos sin backs los..*	I was wear wore shoes without backs the
	S2: *Oh, como sandalias* ↑	oh, like sandals↑
	S1: *sí, un poco pero es los parecen como snickers zapatos*	yes, a little but they look like snickers shoes
	S2: *Oh tenis, creo que es tenis, si*↑	oh, tenis, I think it is tenis, yes↑
	S1: *mmhmm y yo quité mis zapatos para* correr más *rápido*	mmhmm and I took of my shoes to run faster….

In this example S1 does not know the word for a type of shoe and she tries to use circumlocution to define the shoe in mind. She uses an English word in her explanation and S2 replies with the word *sandals* with rising intonation to check whether this is the word that her interlocutor is

looking for. S1 answers affirmatively although it is clear from her utterance that *sandals* is not the right word, but she does not want to threaten her interlocutor´s face who is trying to help her. Instead, she explains further by including another English word, *snickers*. Once again S2 tries to offer another word, *tennis*, but with a comprehension check looking for approval from S1. S1 assents with *mmhmm* and continues with the story. At this point, the exact word is not the issue anymore since a general meaning of the type of shoe has been established so S1 decides to move on with the story.

This focus on overall meaning over correct form appears often in the data. In example 3 below we see how the two participants collaborate in co-constructing meaning even though the forms provided are incorrect. In this example, S1 is telling an incident that happened in her dorm and struggles in coming up with the right forms to complete her utterances. S2 intervenes offering her help, which although is not lexically and grammatically correct, S1 accepts allowing the story to continue.

(3)	S1: *...por una semana o dos semanas no recuerdo el alarma de fuego fue ….muy…no sé*	for one or two weeks I don´t remember the fire alarm was ….very… I don´t know
	S2: *ocurre mucho*	it happens a lot
	S1: *sí, ocurre mucho y durante el medio de noche por tres en la mañana y la misma persona eh…*	yes, it happens a lot y during the middle of night at three in the morning and the same person eh…
	S2: *pone*	puts
	S1: *pone la el alarma y la persona no tiene problemas y un…castigo*	puts the alarm and the person does not have any problems and a punishment
	S2: *oh*	oh

When S2 tries to complete S1 utterance, she does not offer the correct forms for this context but the forms chosen, *ocurre mucho*, are close enough that S1 accepts them. In addition, S2 is able to predict S1's intended meaning, although S1's utterances are choppy and grammatically ill-formed. This process is repeated when S1 struggles to find the word and S2 supplies, *pone.* In both cases, the help provided by S2 achieves its goal of getting the overall meaning expressed despite the fact that both forms are incorrect for the context. Several factors may contribute to this successful communication episode. First, participants share similar background knowledge as they both had lived in a college dorm before, where this story takes place. Also, participants share English as their native language and seem to have similar proficiency levels in Spanish. All this allows for participants to successfully communicate their meaning by cooperating in telling the story but at the cost of modified output that approximates TL norms.

Our participants did not offer *continuers* as defined by Foster and Ohta (2005) but they would frequently interrupt each other to ask follow-up questions, which shows interest in the conversation and encourages talk. However, the use of confirmation moves to offer assistance in co-constructing meaning was prevalent in the data. In example 4, S2 waits for her partner to finish her story and, then, paraphrases the main idea using correct syntax and grammar. She also uses rising intonation, which indicates she wanted to check she understood the message and/or request clarification. S1 responds affirmatively and tries to explain how the incident happened but is not totally successful and decides to cut her turn short.

(4)	S1: *....pero ella continuó bailando*	….but she kept dancing
	y cantando pero muchas personas	and singing but many people
	hablan sobre ella y ella quito su chaqueta	talk about her and she takes off her jacket
	y cayó en su yaqueta oh chaqueta	and she fell on her yacket oh jacket
	S2: *cayó en su chaqueta cuando estaba bailando*↑	She fell on her jacket when she was dancing↑
	S1: *s, porque ella quitó y estaba bailando*	yes, because she took off and was dancing
	y cayó en su sí	and fell on her yes

In example 5, the speaker talks about her life in the dorm where she worked as a supervisor and met her boyfriend. Her partner in the conversation responds to her narration by requesting confirmation about what she meant by a secret. S1 is able to tell the story pretty accurately but the lack of logical connecting devices leads to some ambiguity in the message. The 'secret' could be that the boyfriend lived in the same floor as hers or that she had a boyfriend in a place where she words as a supervisor. This is why S2 requests clarification using the form of a confirmation move.

(5)	S1: *..pero también conocí a mi novio porque*	…but I also met my boyfriend because
	el vivía en mi piso y pues estaba un poco eh..	he lived in my floor and so it was a little bit..
	mis jefes no permitieron este (laughter) *y*	my bosses did not allow this (laughter) and
	por eso fue un poco.. fue un secreto	for that reason it was a bit….it was a secret
	S2: *de ser novio con él*↑	being your boyfriend↑
	S1: *mmhmm* (assenting)	mmhmm (assenting)

In both cases participants assisted their partners in making their message more comprehensible by paraphrasing the intended message at the same time they requested confirmation that the utterances were understood correctly. The possible failure in communication is solved by the assistance offered.

4. Conclusions

This investigation has shown that when non-native speakers who share the same L1 engage in open conversations, they focus their assistance and collaboration on constructing meaning and rarely stop the flow of the conversation to correct forms or negotiate meaning resulted from incorrect use of specific forms. Participants shared English as their native language which explains why even when English terms were used, the conversation would continue, without signaling a meaning negotiation request. Similarly, participants had similar proficiency levels so

sometimes meaning was understood by both parties even when utterances were grammatically incorrect or ill-formed because they followed English grammar and/or syntax. Peer-assistance was achieved by combining different types of strategies and forms, and once the message was understood the conversation would continue. However, it is hard to know why participants used certain strategies and thus, future research should incorporate stimulated recall so we can explore what an interlocutor understood or what his/her intentions were in producing an utterance as a response to a possible communication failure. In sum, it is clear that the primary objective by all participants in the study was to make meaning the goal in interaction, sparing any attention to form. In that sense, these Spanish L2 speakers showed language behavior typical of native speakers interactions where negotiation and co-construction of meaning aim at understanding the message, without focusing on correction of forms.

The scarce instances of meaning negotiations found in the data also indicate that further research is needed focusing on natural L2 conversations. The nature of the classroom assignment from which data was obtained, only led to 35 minutes of talk for each pair of participants. Longer conversations should be analyzed in order to reach conclusive remarks about how L2 learners negotiate and co-construct meaning. Nonetheless, the analysis of the data showed that, learners are able to produce successful meaning when given the opportunity to help each other in making input comprehensible. Some pedagogical implications derive from this finding. Opportunities for pushed output are needed in language teaching but also assessment of oral language competence should take into account how meaning is achieved in conversation. Unfortunately, the vast majority of oral skills' assessment tools today do not favor negotiation work although language pedagogies support classroom practices that imitate real-life language functions. In the classroom teachers are encouraged to do pair work and facilitate natural and spontaneous conversations between learners so they can work through their language imprecisions and make output comprehensible. However, oral formal assessments usually involve monologues such as classroom presentations or interviews between teacher and student. In addition, in these oral interviews focus on form dominates and meaning negotiations are not balanced due to the power distance between teacher and student. The teacher's role in these interviews is to assess language competence and thus, s/he does not facilitate meaning comprehension by collaborating with the student in making meaning. Ultimately oral language assessment should not only be on what learners know, but also on how they manage to make their message intelligible and comprehensible to others by collaborating with their interlocutors in making meaning.

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