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Language resources to negotiate historical thinking in history classroom interactions

Teresa Oteíza*, Rodrigo Henríquez, Valentina Canelo

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile

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ABSTRACT

This article examines different patterns of language resources that both teacher and students use to incorporate other voices in history secondary-level classroom interactions. The study particularly centers on the analysis of interpersonal and ideational linguistic resources used by teachers and students that contribute to the inclusion of historical evidence in the discourse, in combination with the building of *semantic waves* (Maton, 2014, 2016) through the variation of *semantic density* and *semantic gravity*. The analysis shows that when teachers and students use a strong *semantic gravity* (SG+), they also have a tendency of employing a more heteroglossic-oriented discourse, whereas when teachers and students use a strong *semantic density* (SD+), their discourse tends to be oriented to more monoglossic choices in language (Martin & White, 2005). The language resources chosen by teachers and students in their pedagogical interactions impact how historical thinking is constructed in the classroom; particularly regarding the space, these more or less specialized and nonspecialized language resources provide for the incorporation of epistemic and axiological sources, which are necessary to build history as an interpretative social science through different levels of abstraction.

1. Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to explore the patterns of language resources that teachers and students employ to include other voices in history classroom interactions to build historical meanings. The incorporation of different positions in history discourse is key to the construction of evidence, which is a fundamental dimension for building historical reasoning. We argue that the different levels of history complexity and abstraction, which are necessary to construct historical thinking at the secondary school level, are elaborated with language resources that combine specialized and nonspecialized language along with the selection of monoglossic and heteroglossic orientations (Martin & White, 2005); these resources in turn collaborate to create *semantic waves* by means of variation in *semantic density* as the levels of condensation of meaning and *semantic gravity* as the levels of meaning dependence to its context in a certain social practice (Maton, 2014, 2016).

The selection of a more monoglossic or a more heteroglossic orientation, which refers to the inclusion or noninclusion of other voices in the discourse (Martin & White, 2005), is deployed in classroom interactions mainly with the use of a specialized and nonspecialized language by teachers and students. We propose that a joint analysis from a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective, which considers the interpersonal meanings that organize at the discursive semantic level the ENGAGEMENT subsystem of the APPRAISAL system (White, 2003; Martin & White, 2005; White, 2010) and the ideational meanings, both experiential and logical, that allow the realization of specialized and nonspecialized languages (Martin, 1992, 1993; Halliday, 2014), in combination with the dimension of Semantic from the sociological Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (Maton, 2014, 2016), collaborates with our understanding of classroom interactions in terms of the learning opportunities for students regarding the incorporation of historical evidence in their discourse.

The complexity of history as an interpretative social science relies on the construction of a historical argument that is based on primary and secondary sources that can be epistemically and axiologically charged. Therefore, it is relevant to understand how different patterns of language resources play a role in building these interpretative history explanations and their pedagogical recontextualizations at a secondary level in written history textbooks (cf. Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005; Coffin, 2006; Martin, 2002; Myskow, 2018; Oteíza, 2006, 2014; Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteíza, 2004), students' writing (cf. Miller, Mitchell, & Pessoa, 2014; Oteíza, Dalla Porta, & Garrido, 2014; Matruglio, 2018), and

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: moteizas@uc.cl (T. Oteíza), cauquenino@gmail.com (R. Henríquez), valecanelo.a@gmail.com (V. Canelo).

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also history classroom interactions (cf. Manghi, 2013; Matruglio, Maton, & Martin, 2013; Maton, Martin, & Matruglio, 2016; Oteíza, Henríquez, & Pinuer, 2015; Oteíza, 2018), the field in which this article is situated.

Our particular focus is on the identification of the language resources instantiated in history classroom interactions that teachers and students build together to explain historical events, situations and processes, and the role played by the inclusion of other voices as historical evidence in the pedagogical discourse. These more open or constrained heteroglossic and monoglossic orientations are entwined with the selection of language resources used for building a familiar or nonspecialized language or a specialized language in the discourse. We postulate that when the classroom interaction is characterized by a more monoglossic orientation, or with a dialogic contraction orientation, the historical explanation is characterized by the use of a stronger *semantic density* (SD+), which is mainly codified by nominalizations and technical language, whereas when the classroom interaction is characterized by a more heteroglossic orientation, or with a dialogic expansion orientation, the historical explanation is portrayed with the use of a stronger *semantic gravity* (SG+), that is, students and teachers privilege the use of a more familiar and nonspecialized language to include what individual or social historical actors have done, thought, or felt as sources of evidentiality in the historical explanation. In addition, when teachers and students make *semantic waves* (Maton, 2014), namely, when they vary their pedagogical discourse using a combination of strong and weak *sematic density* and *semantic gravity*, they are also varying their discourse by combining monoglossic and heteroglossic choices. This is of particular relevance for history classes as well as for building a historical significance and an understanding of historical explanations because the use of a more specialized and abstract language in combination with the possible inclusion of other perspectives and points of view in history, as the constitutive intertextuality of the discipline (Marwick, 2001), is key to the construction of causality and evidentiality (Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005; Coffin, 2006; Oteíza, 2006; Oteíza & Pinuer, 2016).

Classroom discourse analysis is an important place of connections between linguistics and educational perspectives as many educational linguists and educational sociologists have highlighted in the last decades (Christie, 2002; Manghi, 2013; Maton et al., 2016; Matruglio et al., 2013; Rose & Martin, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2004; Vidal, 2017). Particularly, in the field of history and social sciences, the analysis and typology of history teachers' explanations has been a predominant line of study as it is shown in one of the first studies in this field carried out by Leinhardt (1993, 1997). In recent studies conducted in Latin American countries, Achugar (2013, 2016) analyzes classroom interactions produced in history classes regarding the military dictatorship in Uruguay. In her studies, Achugar characterizes the language resources that allow the construction of meaning of history, in which she specifically focuses on how the interaction of teachers and students generates links between social and analytical memory. In the Chilean context, Oteíza et al. (2015) and Oteíza (2018) demonstrate that, in the classroom, teachers legitimize and delegitimize certain historical memories of epistemological and axiological positions that are in line with the official versions of history. In one study conducted outside of Latin America, Matruglio et al. (2013) analyzed ancient history class interactions in Australia, in which they demonstrated how temporality is implicated in the creation of *semantic waves* (Maton, 2014), as teachers build "temporal shifting" through the combination of different degrees of language in action and language as reflection. In history classes, verbal language is crucial because of its ability to encode social and political experience; therefore, it plays an important role in the students' production, understanding, and development of historical arguments and historical significance.

The capacity to develop historical thinking is one of the most universal curricular goals in history teaching worldwide. The LCT and SFL model permit the identification of the discursive and educational resources used to develop historical thinking in the pedagogical dialog of classroom interactions.

This article is organized in the following manner: the next three sections present the analytical framework in which this work is based: The Semantic dimension of LCT and the resources to build interpersonal meanings organized into the APPRAISAL system and ENGAGEMENT subsystem, as well as the resources to construct ideational meanings, experiential and logical, from the perspective of the SFL theory. In the fourth section, we present the methodology used, and in the fifth section, we present analysis and discussion; the final section provides conclusions and remarks.

2. The semantic dimension and the linguistic resources for building abstraction in history

In this study, we rely on two concepts from the Semantic dimension of LCT, the notion of *semantic gravity* and the notion of *semantic density* (Maton, 2014, 2016). LCT is a sociological theory used to analyze socio-cultural practices. The Semantic dimension of LCT offers tools for characterizing semantic structures in social practices whose organizing principles are conceptualized as semantic codes based on *semantic gravity* and *semantic density*.

The notion of *semantic density* is defined by Maton (2014) as a condensation of meaning in a given socio-cultural practice. This condensation can be expressed in symbols, terms, concepts, phrases, expressions, gestures, actions, or others with higher or lower levels of abstraction, which can also be charged either epistemologically or axiologically. Thus, *semantic density* will move in a continuum between stronger *semantic density* (SD+) and weaker *semantic density* (SD−) depending on the way in which the meanings are condensed. The condensation of meaning, from a language resource perspective in the social practice of a historical pedagogical discourse, can be expressed by the use of specialized language. This nonfamiliar use of language, which is necessary to construct a historical meaning in secondary history classrooms, is generally instantiated by technical words, for example, "state of siege," "Cold war," and "socialist party"; by nominalizations, which can be charged axiologically, such as "the level of violence" and "the escalade of violence"; and also, as we will explain further on, by incongruent expressions of logico-semantic relations of causality in the discourse. Therefore, semantic gravity should be explored in relation to ideational and interpersonal meanings, or in SFL terms, in relation to the systems of IDEATION and APPRAISAL (Martin & Matruglio, 2013).

Semantic gravity refers to the different levels of meaning dependence to its context in a particular social practice. The movement from a weak *semantic gravity* (SG−) to a stronger *semantic gravity* (SG+) is understood by Maton (2014) as a displacement from abstract and general ideas, such as the ones previously mentioned, to concrete ideas and examples of everyday life that can be expressed by a familiar language, for example, when history teachers refer to what people were doing, feeling, or thinking in the past: "in the time when we have curfew the people who lived the curfew said that they had the parties from curfew to curfew. . .". In this example, though, the teacher is moving from a strong *semantic gravity* to a weaker *semantic gravity* with the inclusion of the technical word "curfew," thereby creating some level of *semantic wave*; thus, the common language is actually used by the teacher to explain what people did in recent Chilean past by means of concrete material facts, which in turn allows her to explain to her students the