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## Linguistics and Education

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/linged](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/linged)

## Academic and cultural literacy for heritage speakers of Spanish: A case study of Latin@ students in California



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Available online 28 July 2015

## Keywords:

Spanish as a heritage language  
Critical language awareness  
Systemic functional linguistics  
Educational linguistics

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the multilingual landscape of California and emphasizes the potential of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) in a university curriculum as a way of promoting students' language awareness and cultural literacy. Heritage speakers of Spanish in the U.S. constitute an important student population with unique linguistic and educational needs and challenges, in learning both English and Spanish (Carreira, 2007; Valdés, 2005). Spanish heritage speakers provide an example of a heterogeneous group of learners, both linguistically and culturally. Several studies on bilingualism (García, 2009; Grosjean, 2010; Hornberger, 2003) underline the importance of schooling to develop advanced bi-literacy in the heritage language. Heritage speakers' use of Spanish usually revolves around the home or community domains. As a result of having developed their linguistic registers in informal contexts they have not used Spanish in situations where this particular type of language is utilized to construct knowledge or negotiate membership in an academic or professional community. In light of this fact, they are subsequently less prepared to meet the linguistic and literacy demands of these settings. In order to become legitimate participants then, they not only need to expand their control over a range of oral and written academic registers but, just as importantly, need to negotiate, construct, and index new identities as members of the academic community (Achugar & Colombi, 2008).

This study describes pedagogical practices in a university curriculum for Spanish heritage speakers that stress the relationship between the bilingual continuum and its connection with the social and situational context. These practices emphasize the meaning-making of language in the construal of discourse. They argue for explicit instruction of dialect, genre and register theory as a way of promoting students' language awareness and academic literacy. Furthermore, a functional approach of language highlights the dialectical relationship between language and culture. The use of pedagogical practices that focus on auto-cultural, and inter-cultural language awareness can facilitate not only the development of bi-literacy but also the acceptance of cultural diversity in the Spanish speaking world and of Latin@s in the United States.

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## Introduction

This article examines the practices of teaching and learning Spanish as a heritage language in California. It emphasizes the potential of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) together with Critical Language Awareness (CLA) in a university curriculum

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as a way of promoting students' language awareness and developing advanced cultural and academic literacy. *Advanced literacy* is defined here as the language practices that are used to construct knowledge or negotiate membership in an academic or professional community. Heritage language learners of Spanish are individuals who have acquired the language at home interacting with family members and friends; they are characterized by having functional proficiency in interpersonal and colloquial registers of the language as well as a strong socio-affective connection with the language and culture. Heritage speakers of Spanish want to study the language for a variety of reasons, certainly to use it in their professional fields but also to connect (or re-connect) with their cultural roots, interact with members of their community as well as find (or re-defined) their identity. At the same time, Spanish as the largest minority language in California, is immersed in a social context of contradictory language ideologies and policies that send conflicting messages with respect to their varieties of Spanish as well as to the value of being bilingual in society. Therefore, a pedagogical approach that combines a semiotic theory of language which makes explicit the connection between language and culture together with a critical language awareness approach which emphasizes the connection between language and power in social practices could become an effective tool in addressing the challenges of developing advanced literacy in the heritage language.

I align myself with CLA researchers who “advocate(d) for the inclusion of **explicit discussions about power issues in the context of literacy and language instruction** (Fairclough, 1992; 2004/2011). They wanted to add to the push for more explicit discussions and **conscious reflections** about how meaning is made with language; the idea that these meanings and choices were part of a larger social context. This meant acknowledging that certain *preferred choices* were not so because they were more correct (something that most people espousing this view of language agreed with), but also questioning the idea that the substitution of *correct* for *appropriate* linking it to a particular context hid the power struggles within that context by which certain choices were deemed more valuable or acceptable (Introduction to this volume) (the emphasis is mine)”. The relationship of language and power as a way of construing not only discourse but also in understanding language ideologies is nowhere more evident than in the instruction of heritage languages. This article as many other in this volume (e.g. 1 – Developing Teachers' Critical Language Awareness: A Case Study of Guided Participation; 2 – Constructing Racial Literacy through Critical Language Awareness and 3 – Pre-Service English Language Arts Teachers' Development of Critical Language Awareness for Teaching, among others) strongly advocate for the explicit instruction of the language as a way of becoming apprenticed into the professional community.

SFL, developed by the British linguist, Michael Halliday and his colleagues (e.g. Christie & Unsworth, 2000; Halliday & Hasan, 1976, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999, 2004 to mention just a few) is a semiotic theory of language that is socially shaped. It describes language as *a meaning making resource*. Halliday and Matthiessen in the introduction to *Construing experience through meaning: a language based approach to cognition* (1999, p. 1) say that “the construal of human experience [is] (as) a semantic system; and language plays the central role in storing and exchanging experience but also in constructing it.” In other words: “**experience is the reality that we construe for ourselves by means of language.**” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999, p. 3) Therefore, SFL is a functional theory of language that is semantically motivated, i.e. the categories that make the *system* are based on meaning; it enables us to investigate how experience is construed in semantic terms, i.e. a theory of language that is “semantically motivated” as opposed to a formal theory of language that could be “semantically arbitrary”. This semantic perspective on grammar implies that meaning and form are not separated, but stand in a dialectic relation to each other. Meanings do not exist before the wordings that realize them, and they do not exist in a vacuum but they are always immersed in a social context (Hasan, 1996).

In educational contexts, “language is the fundamental resource in which teachers and students work together. Language is the principal semiotic or meaning-making resource available to students, and their success in learning depends quite crucially on the extent to which **they master language, engaging with the many ways in which it varies and changes, depending on context and purpose.** Such a statement applies even in the multimodal world of the 21st century in which many verbal or visual resources are used in teaching and learning (Christie, 2012, p. 7). (The emphasis is mine.) Furthermore, SFL understands literacy as an “activity”, i.e. what we do with language, our language practices. Halliday (1996, pp. 29–31) characterizes the concept of literacy from a linguistic point of view as follows: “(1) treating literacy as something that has to do with language; and (2) using the conceptual framework of functional linguistics as a way of understanding it. . . . **Literacy can be conceived as activity rather than as knowledge.** . . . being literate **means engaging with language** and its written form: distinguishing what is writing from what is not writing.” (The emphasis is mine). SFL shares with CLA approaches this dynamic perspective of language as an activity, i.e. placing it in its situational context but also understanding the dialectical relationship between the uses of language and its users.

When considering what pedagogical practices we can use for Spanish heritage speakers at the university level, SFL with its emphasis on language as socially situated and CLA with its emphasis on awareness of the social practices are valuable resources in connecting the bilingual experience of the students with their goals for developing advanced literacy in the heritage language. In this article I argue for the explicit instruction of dialect, genre and register theory as a way of promoting students' language awareness and academic literacy.

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