The language functions of *tipo* in Argentine vernacular

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Abstract

This article provides a case study account of the language functions of *tipo*, which is a pragmatic feature of Argentine Spanish vernacular, as used by 10 young adult native speakers of the language (ages 18–25), in the context of oral face-to-face and synchronous technology-mediated written interactions with young adult Spanish L2 learners. An examination of naturally occurring and self-reported language awareness data suggests that *tipo* has acquired a wide array of pragmatic functions—it is a marker of hesitation, exemplification, reformulation, vagueness, and quoted speech. In its non-pragmatic marking uses, it can refer to an unspecified man, preface a hyponym, and be used to make a comparison. Participants' usage patterns, in conjunction with their understanding of sociopragmatic variability in the use of *tipo*, are discussed as a direction for research in colloquial features of youth vernacular.
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1. Introduction

Interest in researching the characteristics of the language used by teenagers and young adults has increased in the last 20 years. However, there are still very few studies in this area, especially in regard to languages other than English (Stenström et al., 2002) among which Spanish in particular has been neglected (Rodríguez, 2002). Zimmermann (1996) makes the case that youth vernacular does not receive much attention because the social group that uses this variety is considered marginal—young people are underage and economically dependent. Importantly, the characteristics of their speech are short-lived; new words are adopted and old ones acquire new meanings at a fast pace (Zimmermann, 1996). From a research perspective, the nearer we get to ''the vernacular,'' teenage and young adult talk is ''likely to play a part in language change and often works its way into 'standard' language'' (Stenström et al., 2002:x).

Prior applied linguistics research has revealed that one of the most distinctive characteristics of teenage and young adult language is its vocabulary; an example in English is the prevalence of *like* and *go* over *say* as quotative verbs (Stenström et al., 2002). Teenagers and young adults have also been found to imbue old words with new meanings. To be sure, the way these speakers talk draws criticism from parents and instructors alike, especially their ''use of slang, vague and dirty words, often in combination with a lot of 'unnecessary' smallwords, especially *like*'' (Stenström et al., 2002:63). However, a linguistic focus on these features is essential, as they are very frequent and thus constitute a defining characteristic of conversational grammar, ''but are found much more frequently in adolescent conversation'' (Stenström, 2012:2411).

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More importantly, they are often used as an expression of a shared experience (Rymes, 2011) or markers of peer-group membership (Tagliamonte, 2016). Despite being ''referentially opaque,'' expressions such as *tipo* ''indicate not that their speakers are vacuous but that these words encapsulate ambiguities too complex or localized to express explicitly'' (Rymes, 2011:208).

The term 'youth vernacular' here refers to the language production of Argentine undergraduate students during the spring of 2012 when the data were collected. *Tipo*, a feature of youth vernacular, is frequently used in, and is thus a hallmark of unplanned spoken interactions among young speakers of Argentine Spanish. The aim of this study is two-fold: (1) to provide a case-study account of the uses of *tipo* (which roughly serves similar functions as *type*, *guy*, *like* and *around* in American English), a colloquial lexical feature characteristic of Argentine Spanish vernacular, as spoken by 10 young adult native speakers of the language (ages 18–25). These uses are in the context of oral face-to-face interactions and technology-mediated written interactions (i.e., text chat) with young adult Americans (ages 18–22) who were studying L2 Spanish in Argentina; (2) to characterize its contexts of use, levels of formality, and any additional layers of meaning (e.g., stereotypes) based on the participants' responses to a language awareness test. Overall, this study blends a discourse analytic description of the linguistic patterns that emerged from the participants' documented language performance together with the analysis of participants' metapragmatic awareness of their social functions.

2. The use of *tipo* in Argentine Spanish

According to recent dictionaries of Argentine vernacular Spanish, *tipo* is most frequently used in colloquial Spanish as a noun to describe an individual (male or female) with what is usually a slightly negative connotation (Conde, 2004). But in the current vernacular of Argentine adolescent and undergraduate speakers, *tipo* appears to have acquired a more extensive array of language functions, in particular as a pragmatic marker (Huseby, 2010; Kornfeld, 2013). *Tipo* has also been found to be used as a pragmatic marker in other varieties of Spanish, such as Madrid youth vernacular (Mihatsch, 2010; Stenström, 2012), as well as other languages, such as Swedish (Stenström, 2012), Italian and Portuguese (Mihatsch, 2007, 2010).

Pragmatic markers are single or multi-word expressions that often serve two major functions. In their textual function, they help establish relationships between topics or grammatical units adding to the cohesiveness of discourse; in their interpersonal function, they not only express different speakers' attitudes but also their relationship to or attitude toward the hearer(s) (Brinton, 1996). Some Spanish pragmatic markers have received a fair amount of attention, especially in terms of their use by L1 Spanish speakers, for example *pues* 'so' (e.g., Martínez García, 1990; Porroche Ballesteros, 1996; Travis, 2005; Stenström, 2006a,b; Vázquez Carranza, 2013) and *bueno* 'well' (e.g., Fuentes Rodríguez, 1993; Bauhr, 1994; Serrano, 1999; García Vizcaíno and Martínez-Cabeza, 2005; Travis, 2005; Bellés-Fortuño and Fortanet-Gómez, 2009). In comparison, other pragmatic markers have received little attention; examples include two Spanish pragmatic markers with functions similar to those of 'like' in English: *como* (Jørgensen and Stenström, 2009) and *en plan* (Stenström, 2012; Jørgensen, 2009) in different varieties of Spanish. Such is also the case of *tipo* in Argentine Spanish, with what appears to be only one empirical study available to date (Huseby, 2010). Like many other pragmatic markers, *tipo* is functionally complex and has different syntactic functions. Just like other frequent pragmatic markers that are characteristic of the spoken language production of young speakers (Jørgensen and Martínez Lopez, 2007), its manifold pragmatic functions of *tipo* remain understudied.

Huseby (2010) examined the discourse functions of *tipo* in the Corpus Oral de Lenguaje Adolescente de Buenos Aires (Oral Corpus of Adolescent Language from Buenos Aires; COLAba) (Jørgensen, 2007).[1] At the time of Huseby's study, COLAba had a total of 50,000 words. Huseby identified 462 uses of *tipo* as a discourse marker, to which she attributed six functions: to hedge, to approximate, to exemplify, to intensify, to gain processing time (i.e., as a filler), and to mark reported speech. The most prevalent functions in her analysis were hesitation and exemplification marker (with 301 and 114 uses, respectively). Huseby notes that the speakers in COLAba are all middle and higher middle class but she does not report the total number of speakers.

Throughout Huseby's thesis, the illustrative uses for each of these functions come from a group of ten speakers (9 females, 1 male). The vast majority of examples, however, come from two female speakers in particular (referred to as Agus and Noelia). In fact, Huseby argues that 98% of the uses in COLAba are from female speakers, with only 10 recorded uses for a restricted number of functions (filler, approximation, and exemplification) by males in the entire corpus.

The present study seeks to expand on Huseby's (2010) work by identifying and describing youth-speak meanings of *tipo* in two different media, face-to-face and technology-mediated communication, in interactions between Spanish speakers of undergraduate age. It also expands the scope of Huseby's work by investigating *tipo*'s functions in

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[1] This appears to be the only existing corpus of Argentine teenage Spanish language. It comprises colloquial interactions among teenagers from Buenos Aires (all L1 speakers). Access to COLAba can be requested at http://www.colam.org/om_prosj-espannol.html.