

# A systemic functional approach to teaching Spanish for heritage speakers in the United States

M. Cecilia Colombi

*Department of Spanish, University of California, Davis, CA 95616, United States*

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## Abstract

Heritage language speakers constitute a unique cultural and linguistic resource in the United States while also presenting particular challenges for language educators and language programs. This paper examines the potential of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) in a curriculum for Spanish second language learners/heritage speakers, with particular emphasis on the meaning-making of language in the construal of discourse. Following SFL pedagogy, descriptive language teaching refers to ways of treating language in functional terms; productive language teaching involves students in using the resource of their language in powerful ways in light of the demands of particular social contexts.

Many heritage speakers have developed their heritage language (Spanish) in the family context but want to be able to use it in the professional areas. SFL with its explicit focus on language allows for the development of advanced literacy in a heritage language in the educational context. Accordingly, the paper discusses explicit instruction of genre/register theory as a way of promoting students' awareness of discourse-semantics and lexicogrammatical features of academic language in courses for heritage speakers. Students' success in developing academic registers in Spanish is evident in their use of lexicogrammatical features (such as grammatical metaphor) that index academic writing.

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## 1. Spanish as a heritage language in the United States

This paper examines a curriculum built on the notion of a genre-based literacy, a framework that has been elaborated within systemic functional linguistics (SFL). In particular, it discusses how this framework has informed a curriculum for heritage speakers of Spanish in the United States as it has been developed at the University of California, Davis, a northern California university.

That effort is itself embedded in major socio-demographic changes in the Latino population in the United States in general, in California in particular. In what has been called *a demographic revolution*, Hispanics, a term used by the U.S. Census Bureau, have become the largest minority in the United States. The latest projections of the U.S. Census Bureau in 2004 reported 40.4 million Hispanics in the continental United States; in other words, Latinos make up 14% of the national population ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov), 2006). Latinos, or Hispanics,<sup>1</sup> are very diverse, coming from all corners of Latin America, although the great majority (66%) are of Mexican descent who, at the same time, represent the

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*E-mail address:* [cmcolombi@ucdavis.edu](mailto:cmcolombi@ucdavis.edu).

<sup>1</sup> Hispanic is preferred and was first used by the U.S. Census Bureau in the 1960s during the Nixon Administration to refer to all people of Latin American descent.

youngest group (with over 38 % younger than 18) and therefore are more likely to be enrolled in K-12 classes. More than half of the Latino population resides in California<sup>2</sup> and Texas. Because of considerable maintenance of Spanish and due to continuing immigration from Latin America, California probably has the highest percentage of Spanish speakers of Mexican heritage (80%) who report speaking a language other than English at home (Roca & Colombi, 2003).

These figures are significant inasmuch as they represent a momentous demographic shift in terms of the value of Spanish as a heritage language and also of Spanish as the most frequently spoken second language in the United States: Spanish has moved beyond the family into the public arena, where its presence is obvious in social, artistic, economic, and even political circles. Thus, in a recent newspaper article, Gorney (2007), discussing the use of Spanish in the United States, estimated 928 billion dollars of economic activity to be traceable to Hispanics. This estimate was calculated by the Association of Hispanic Advertising Agencies for 2007 as a spending level on the part of Hispanic consumers in the United States. If one includes the projected spending of American-born citizens, green-card residents, and the undocumented, this figure is much higher than for many Latin American economies, such as Colombia, Chile, or Argentina (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). Being bilingual in California, then, is not merely a skill; it represents an advantage, perhaps even a necessity in the world of work. For example, in several job categories (e.g., police work, the health care profession, and the food industry) employees may receive a monthly supplement if they speak Spanish, and hospitals and courts typically require that some employees, including nurses, be bilingual in Spanish, Chinese, and other heritage languages.<sup>3</sup>

This generalized use of Spanish underscores the paradox of two co-existing linguistic ideologies that prevail in California (and also in many other parts of the country): attitudes of ‘language pride’ and attitudes of ‘language panic’ (Martínez, 2006). With regard to the latter, California was one of the first states to approve English as the official language, in 1986; it was soon followed by other states with a significant Latino population, like Florida, Colorado, and Arizona. More recently, in 1998, Proposition 227, which banned bilingual education, was approved with long-term implications for the teaching of any language other than English in K-12. At the same time, there is interest in ‘foreign language’ abilities in the general population, a kind of ‘language pride.’ This ambivalence toward language abilities leads to a curious situation: in the United States, in contrast with other countries and as a result of Proposition 227 (or similar ones in other states), most of the schools do not offer bilingual education or education in any other language but English. Thus, students who may be fluent in a heritage language, for example Latinos, are immersed in ‘English-only-schools,’ an arrangement that moves them towards monolingualism until they reach higher education, where they are asked to study a ‘foreign language,’ for example Spanish.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Linguistic profiles of Spanish heritage students

Beyond the challenges presented by contradictory language policies, curricula for heritage speakers also face formidable challenges from the students for whom they are intended, who show considerable variation in language proficiency. This is so because the extent and nature of use of the heritage language in the family and community, even in academic contexts, along with sociolinguistic factors for immigrants, like age of arrival, schooling in the heritage language at home or in the community, significantly influence students’ language proficiency (see Silva-Corvalán, 1994, 2003; Zentella, 1997). Table 1, adapted from Valdés (1997), presents some linguistic characteristics of Spanish heritage students.

This listing clearly indicates the dynamic nature of language development in heritage speakers and the close relationship between language abilities and language use. Whether a speaker will become dominant in one or the

<sup>2</sup> According to the census, 35.2% of the total population of California (almost 36.5 million people in 2005) is of Hispanic origin.

<sup>3</sup> However in a recent survey of Latino professionals reported in Valdés, Fishman, Chávez, and Pérez (2006, pp. 82–84), many declared that, while they did use Spanish in their work context, they did not have an interest in developing their skills in Spanish. Thus the results of this survey (135 people) give the impression that the need of improving the use of Spanish in the public arena is not valued in the same way by many of the professionals interviewed.

<sup>4</sup> In academic contexts the term ‘heritage languages’ refers to the same set of languages as does ‘foreign languages’ (e.g., Spanish, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese); by contrast, ‘heritage language students’ are differentiated from ‘foreign language students’ primarily by having been raised at home in the heritage language or having some family connection to the language.

Table 1  
Selected characteristics of students who enroll in Spanish for Native Speakers language courses (from Valdés, 1997, p. 14).

Types of students	Characteristics
Newly arrived-Type A	Well-schooled in Spanish-speaking country Speakers of prestige variety of Spanish
Newly arrived-Type B	Poorly-schooled in Spanish-speaking country Speakers of stigmatized variety of Spanish
Bilingual-Type A	Access to bilingual instruction in U.S. Basic academic skills in Spanish Good academic skills in English Fluent functional speakers of contact variety of rural Spanish
Bilingual-Type B	No academic skills in Spanish Good academic skills in English Fluent but limited speakers of contact variety of rural Spanish
Bilingual-Type C	No academic skills in Spanish Good academic skills in English Fluent but limited speakers of prestige variety of Spanish Some contact phenomena present
Bilingual-Type D	No academic skills in Spanish Poor academic skills in English Fluent but limited speakers of contact variety of rural Spanish
Bilingual-Type E	No academic skills in Spanish Poor academic skills in English Very limited speaker of contact variety of rural Spanish
Bilingual-Type F	No academic skills in Spanish Poor academic skills in English Receptive bilingual in contact variety of rural Spanish

other language at a point in time or attain a ‘balanced bilingualism’ depends significantly on social context, motivation, schooling in the language, and opportunities for actual use.

Most of the heritage language learners of Spanish in our program have developed their heritage language at home or in familiar contexts; very few have received formal education in Spanish (see Table 2).

Recognizing that larger context, the program described here addresses heritage language students who combine diverse aspects of types: Newly-arrived A and B, Bilingual A–B from Table 1; i.e., the heritage student population that we serve has developed academic skills in English (they have obtained a high school diploma) and they can use a colloquial variety of Spanish which they have developed primarily at home, with friends, in what Goffman (1981) called ‘backstage activities.’ It is not clear nowadays that the descriptors of ‘second or third generation’ are operational as more and more heritage language learners come from homes with a wide variety of backgrounds and intermarriage within Latinos is a very common occurrence. The most important differences between the profile of heritage language learners presented by Valdés in Table 1 and our student population presented in Table 2 are that, as university students, our heritage language learners have good academic skills in English and are fluent speakers of a certain variety of Spanish, either rural or urban, from Mexico or from other Central or Latin American regions. They can also write in Spanish, though at a very basic level. Furthermore, most students in the program will not continue with Spanish as a major but want to develop a good level of Spanish for use in their professional lives. In those aspirations they reflect a segment of society that values the use of Spanish in public settings, in jobs and careers, but also in the context of friends and family.

### 3. Genre-based literacy

Such wide-ranging interests and goals in the study of Spanish confront the profession with several challenges. Among them are: How do heritage language learners differ from L2 learners (Valdés, 1997, 2005)? Should pedagogies

Table 2

Characteristics of students enrolling in Spanish for native speaker programs at the university level.

Types of students	Characteristics
Newly arrived-Type A	Well-schooled in Spanish-speaking country ( <b>at least 5 years of schooling in Spanish</b> ) <b>Speakers of urban or rural variety of Spanish</b> <b>Good academic skills in English</b>
Newly arrived-Type B	Poorly-schooled in Spanish-speaking country ( <b>no more than two or three years of schooling in Spanish</b> ) <b>Speakers of urban or rural variety of Spanish</b> <b>Good academic skills in English</b>
Bilingual-Type A	<b>Born in the U.S. (second or third generation, or a combination of both)</b> Access to bilingual instruction in U.S. Basic academic skills in Spanish Good academic skills in English <b>Fluent functional speakers of contact variety of Spanish (rural or urban)</b>
Bilingual-Type B	<b>Born in the U.S. (second or third generation, or a combination of both)</b> No academic skills in Spanish Good academic skills in English <b>Fluent speakers of contact variety of Spanish (rural or urban)</b>

aim at the monolingual speaker of Spanish? Or is there a linguistic norm that could be applied in the case of HL education (Valdés, 2005)? Can we draw from SLA pedagogies for heritage language (HL) instruction (Lynch, 2003; Valdés, 2005)?

Coming from SFL as an *explicitly meaning-oriented theory of language* and as *explicitly education-oriented* (Christie, 1999, 2002; Halliday, 1985, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1976, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Hasan & Williams, 1996; Martin, 1985/1989, 1992) some of the questions that arise when working with heritage learners are:

- What are the most effective pedagogies for heritage speakers?
- Can we address the language diversity in Spanish by representing different varieties and registers of Spanish in our curriculum?
- Should our curriculum aim at developing students' multiple literacies in Spanish instead of focusing on an abstract concept such as the 'monolingual' speaker of Spanish?

Specifically, Halliday's social theory of language maintains as a fundamental principle the indivisibility of language, meaning, and use: language is shaped by social contexts and social contexts are shaped by people using language. Language, then,

is functional in the sense that it is designed to account for how the language is **used**. Every text – that is, everything that is said or written – unfolds in some context of use; furthermore it is the uses of language that, over tens of thousands of generations, have shaped the system. Language has evolved to satisfy human needs; and the way it is organized is functional with respect to those needs . . . . A functional grammar is essentially a 'natural' grammar, in the sense that everything in it can be explained, ultimately, by reference to how language is used (Halliday, 1994, p. xiii; original emphasis).

From this perspective language is a semiotic meaning-making resource that is always related to the social context. This perspective of language education proposes that the explicit description of language functions allows for a conscious understanding of the linguistic repertoire that can then be deployed productively in various contexts, according to the different intentions and purposes of the users. By learning about the Spanish grammatical system in Spanish as a meaning-making resource and by understanding the multilayers of meaning in texts of various types, heritage learners may gain a better awareness and understanding of meaning–form relationships that affect their sense of choice and enhance their semiotic capacities in the heritage language as well as in the first one.

Within SFL, the genre-based literacy movement initiated in Australia by Martin (1984, 1986, 1993; see also Christie & Martin, 1997; Feez, 1998; Rothery, 1996; Rothery & Stenglin, 1997; also Martin, in this issue), was in the main

spurred by a desire to find better tools for language teaching in K-12 education. Applied in different contexts of L2 language education in North America, particularly for advanced and academic language learning (Achugar & Colombi, 2008; Byrnes, 2002a, 2002b, 2006; Byrnes, Weger-Guntharp, & Sprang, 2006; Colombi, 1997, 2002, 2003; Crane, 2006; Mohan, 1986; McCarthy & Carter, 1994; Ortega & Byrnes, 2008; Ryshina-Pankova, 2006; Schleppegrell, 2004; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002; Teruya, 2006), has also proven fruitful for heritage language education. Conceived of as “a staged, goal oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture” (Martin, 1984, p. 25) the concept of genre extends beyond literary genres like short stories, novels, and autobiographies to include every activity that is performed with language and recognized in a culture to fulfill a variety of functions, most especially those of public life in institutions, the academy, and the professions.

#### 4. Spanish as a heritage language: a functional approach to developing advanced literacy

Few of the heritage language learners in our program have received any formal schooling in Spanish. In that sense, one can describe the educational challenge a heritage language program needs to meet as enabling its learners to attain the kinds of advanced levels of ability that are associated with the language of schooling in general, academic language use or the development of competent levels of literacy in particular. To accomplish this educational goal, the curriculum builds on thematic clusters of texts (macro-genres according to Christie, 1997) that present different text-types or genres in a variety of modalities (oral, written, including movies). Each thematic cluster is organized around a theme, for example globalization, immigration, the role of women in contemporary society, and Latinos in the United States among others. At the same time, instruction explicitly focuses on language from the very beginning of the program by establishing a direct relationship between the text and its realization at the level of lexis and grammar. In other words, pedagogy focuses on the text in terms of content while attending to how the lexicogrammatical features of the text help in the very realization of textual content. All texts are authentic and none have been abridged or altered. Taken together, they represent a considerable diversity of genres (literary genres such as short stories and poems, but also non-literary genres, such as testimonies, news articles, editorials, and academic texts, particularly from the social sciences and humanities). These choices include different sociolinguistic varieties of Spanish and different regions of the Spanish-speaking world, including the United States, thereby exposing students to the diversity that characterizes the global Spanish language. The idea behind this selection is not to validate one variety of Spanish over the other but to show how every variety and register of Spanish is functional and appropriate in enabling relationships in certain social contexts.

Texts presented in the curriculum move from interpersonal and colloquial registers (e.g., interviews, movies, plays) to those belonging to more public and formal contexts, such as academia and public events and fora. In this fashion the program conveys that different language varieties serve different functions in their contexts of production and are not inherently more or less valuable. By analyzing these texts in terms of the major functional dimensions of field, mode, and tenor (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Hasan, 1985), learners can come to understand the connection between the text, its realization, and the context where it was produced. The oral-written continuum of language (Halliday, 1985, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1976, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) provides a starting point for focusing students' awareness of language use and function. The following diagram exemplifies the major characteristics of this continuum (see also Colombi, 2006; Colombi, Pellettieri, & Rodriguez, 2007):

Students are introduced to this language continuum with the idea to focus on the language and develop the skills to “think grammatically” (Halliday, 1996). For example, in the thematic unit of ‘Latinos in the United States’, the students begin reading a short story called “Las repatriaciones de noviembre” by Francisco Alarcón (Colombi et al., 2007). First there is a discussion of the field of the short story, with questions such as:

1. What is the story about?
2. Where and when is it situated?

Then the discussion will move to tenor, discussing the characters within the short story and in relationship to us, the audience or readers. In thinking about tenor we will consider the continuum between formality and informality (Colombi et al., 2007) and then concentrate on mode and language with questions such as:

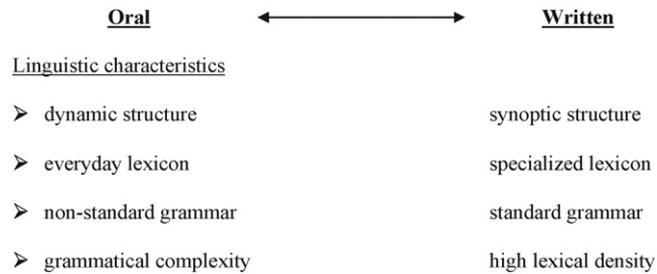


Fig. 1. Oral–written continuum adapted from Halliday (1985).

Table 3

Excerpt from “Las repatriaciones de noviembre” by Francisco X. Alarcón.

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...

Y después de un prolongado silencio, Chéncho, tu hermano, exclama casi a gritos:  
 - Dammit, I was born and raised in this neighborhood! I’m not from Mexico, this is my country!  
 - Ay, sí Chéncho, ahora sí muy “American”¿no?- replica una voz burlona entre el grupo de muchachos y todos se ríen a carcajadas (Colombi et al., 2007, p. 211)

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1. Where would you place this short story in the language continuum described in Fig. 1?
2. Exemplify the orality of the short story. (This short story presents a lot of conversations between the characters. It is based in Los Angeles so there is code-switching as well.)

The short story is made up of dialogues as well as narratives and descriptions, so we will take the following exchange (see Table 3) and ask students to place it in the continuum of language, explaining their linguistic characteristics:

The colloquial words (dammit), the non-standard grammar, and code-switching (Ay, sí Chéncho, ahora sí muy “American”¿no?-) place this exchange on the extreme side of orality. Students start analyzing the text and relating its meaning to its lexicogrammatical form and its function in this particular context.

Because SFL assumes the fundamental interconnectedness between language use and meaning, including specific forms of language use, and social context, a key aspect of an SFL-inspired educational approach is to assure that students develop exactly that awareness: the fundamentally social nature of language use practices – and that includes literate practices – and how these practices are socially positioned. For that reason, even the generally postulated difference between oral and written modes of language must be examined in context, so as to understand local considerations that motivated specific language choices. In other words, the oral–written continuum refers not only to transmission in a certain medium but includes the context of production as that is reflected in the three variables of register (field, mode, and tenor). Thus, in discussing the speech by Gabriel García Márquez as he accepts the Nobel Prize for Literature, the class considers not only that it was delivered orally but how field, tenor, and mode have also shifted in line with the genre. Seen in this fashion, one can conclude that the text is situated much closer to the written end of the language continuum presented in Fig. 1.

At the same time, the curriculum is based on thematic units that are represented by clusters of textual genres that move from the most personal experience to highly academic genres. In the context of heritage language education and mindful of the consequences of language pride and language panic, the program starts out with the language variety students possess as they enter the classroom (most of the students bring with them a colloquial variety of Spanish). Such a strategy not only validates that language form but also demonstrates language varieties as occurring along a sociolinguistic, functionally motivated continuum. In this fashion, students are able to expand their generic and registerial resources in the direction of a public literacy in Spanish while retaining and having their own variety of Spanish affirmed.

Figure 2 below illustrates the movement from the personal to academic language.

The texts indicated in the figure represent three different genres on the topic of the Mexican-American experience and immigration; together they illustrate the movement from language that is more “oral” or interpersonal (i.e., the short story) to language that is more “written” (monological) and academic: the text *La voz urgente* by Manuel Rodríguez, an introduction to a literary anthology, which is a very specialized academic text. In between these two types of texts, there is a newspaper essay written by Carlos Fuentes as a response to the anti-immigrant climate or “language panic”

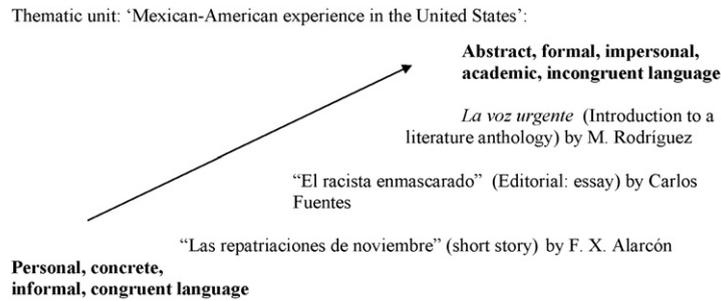


Fig. 2. Example of a thematic cluster of genres from *Palabra abierta* (Colombi et al., 2007).

attitude. This editorial presents a more argumentative language that moves from colloquial to more abstract, condensed or academic language. Paraphrasing Halliday (1980), even the choices of materials in the curriculum encourage students to learn “language, through language and about language.”

This curricular progression is shown in Fig. 3. It proposes a cycle that moves from the model text in terms of its content to students’ analysis of the text in terms of its lexicogrammatical features. At the same time it implies a cycle of instruction that highlights different genres as it moves from understanding the text from the perspective of content (negotiation of the field, deconstruction) and lexis and grammar, to constructing new texts (joint construction and independent construction).

This cycle is repeated with each text in a pedagogy that uses a conscious and explicit focus on how language means to develop advanced awareness and literacy in the language. Continuing with the example of the short story: “Las repatriaciones de noviembre” described in Table 3, students begin by reading the short story and talking about the field of the short story (what is the story about, the first stage of the cycle: ‘negotiation of the field’); then they move to the ‘deconstruction of the text,’ where they take into the account the social variables of field, mode, and tenor. They discuss when, where, and for what purpose the text was produced. After this the focus is on the text, the functional components

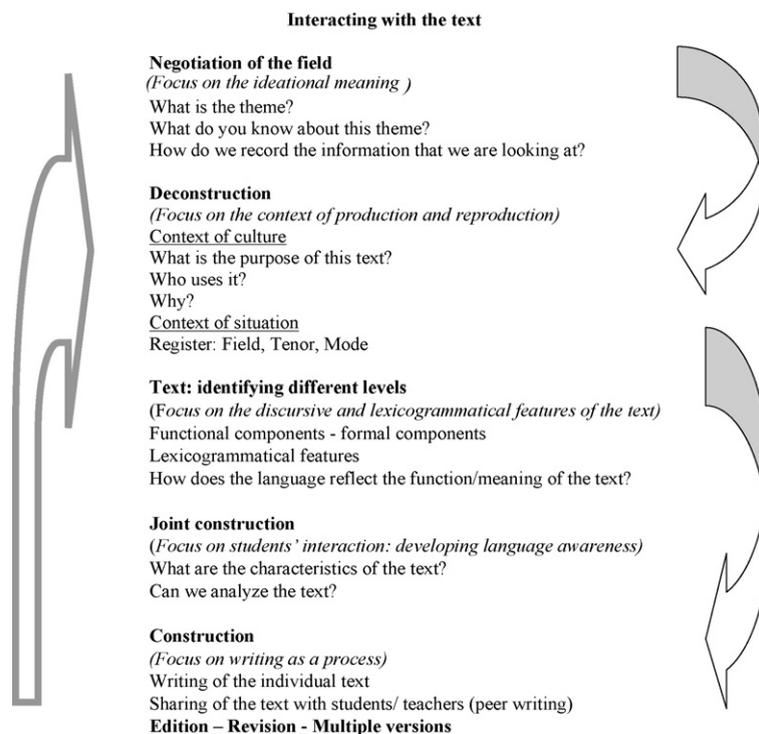


Fig. 3. Cycle of learning (adapted from Martin, 1993; see also Martin, this issue).

Table 4  
Description of students' written genres used in the program (based on Halliday, 1994; Martin, 1992).

Genre [staging]	Informal description	Key linguistic features (Based on Halliday, 1994; Martin, 1992)
<i>Examen</i> (Exam) [background ^ record ^ position]	Exam question establishing the position and justifying it	Linear organization of factors + internal organization of point of view
<i>Reseña</i> (Review) [background ^ record ^ (evaluation)]	Review of a book/movie	Linear organization of factors 3rd person (impersonal) Specific participants
<i>Reporte/Informe</i> (Report) [background ^ record]	Logical description of a theory/establishing the time line of a literary/linguistic school of thought	Internal organization of factors 3rd person (impersonal)
<i>Ensayo</i> (Essay) [thesis ^ arguments ^ conclusion]	Position on a theme that needs to be justified (more than one position can be presented)	Logical organization of ideas  Internal conjunction keying on thesis + internal organization of points of view
<i>Monografía</i> (Research paper) [introduction ^ arguments ^ conclusion ^ sources]	A position on a theme that needs to be justified Primary and secondary sources need to be consulted	Logical organization of ideas  Internal conjunction keying on thesis + internal organization of points of view Use of primary and secondary sources

and lexicogrammatical features that characterize that genre. Those features are exemplified in the particular text, for example the short story. After this careful reading and re-reading of the text the students move to construct a text within the same thematic unit, i.e., a response to the reading in a form of a journal entry or argumentative writing in the form of an academic essay. Students explore and practice with different kinds of genres in groups with peers, 'joint construction,' or individually in the 'construction' stage. At the same time there is a difference between public and private writing: the first is to be shared, revised, rewritten in multiple versions for a grade; the second is mostly used as communication between teacher and students or among students and may take different forms, such as journals, e-chatting or e-blogs.

Table 4 exemplifies the genres the students have produced in the program for Spanish as a heritage language. The main objective of this program is to move students within the continuum of language from the colloquial to the academic registers. This program focuses mostly on cultural studies and what is typically referred as language arts. But the same principles could be taken to develop Spanish in the professions, such as Spanish and the law or Spanish in the health care professions, among other.

The thematic cluster as well as the cycle of learning is combined in the kind of activities students engage in during the academic year. Fig. 4 shows a cluster of texts dealing with the same unit: "Mexican-Americans in the United States".

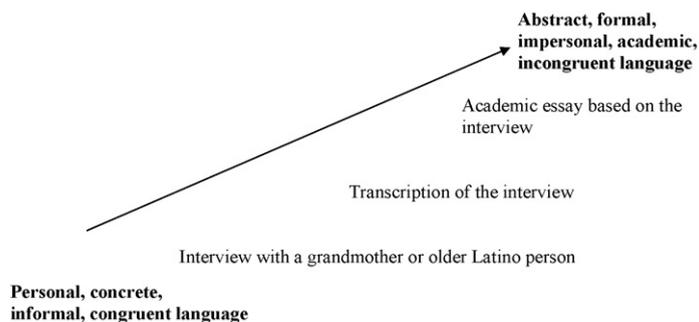


Fig. 4. Students' writings on the thematic unit: "Mexican-Americans in the United States".

Table 5  
Examples from model texts.

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Model text A

**Proclamar** el inglés lengua única de los Estados Unidos es una prueba de miedo y soberbia inútiles. (Carlos Fuentes, *Palabra abierta*: 254)  
[To proclaim English the only language of the U.S.]

Model text B

“Chicano” hace referencia a las personas **de origen mexicano** cuya experiencia vital está marcada **de forma sustancial por su pertenencia**, en cualquier nivel, **a la realidad mexicana**

...

Desde un punto de vista diacrónico es importante notar también **la tradicional vinculación del término con la clase trabajadora** (Manuel Martín-Rodríguez, *Palabra abierta*, p. 187)

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Table 6

Excerpts from student interviews and essays.

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1- Interview (oral language) – transcription (Maira)<sup>6</sup>

M- ¿Cómo fue su niñez en el sitio donde nació o se crió?

L- Muy bonita porque tenía a mi papá y mi mamá y mis amigas. Me gustaba ir al campo con mis papas a sembrar semillas de frijoles y maíz. Me venía a la casa a bañar, lavar ropa y ayudar a mamá. En la tarde me juntaba con las amigas para jugar baseball...

2- Essay (Maira) thesis statement

... Aunque se supone que una niña de trece años sólo piensa en jugar con las amigas, en realidad, Lucía Mora de niña fue testigo y vivió **el gran esfuerzo que es trabajar para mantener a la familia**. Esta experiencia es importante porque podemos ver cómo **el valor del trabajo para una niña quien dejó los juegos de amigas**, la transformó en una mujer a muy temprana edad y aprendió a valerse por sí misma.

3- Essay (Rosalia) Sacrificio para progresar

En los últimos meses el tema de la inmigración ha hecho controversia y las reacciones han sido escuchadas en ambos países divididos por la frontera: los Estados Unidos y México. La controversia implica a los once millones de inmigrantes que trabajan y viven en los EE. UU. si tener documentos para hacerlo legalmente. Los inmigrantes ilegales vienen de países localizados en diferentes regiones alrededor del mundo como centro y sur América pero el mayor número de personas inmigran de México. [En esta composición me enfocaré con **las experiencias personales de los inmigrantes que han impactado al país estadounidense en la cultura, economía y en los valores sociales.**]

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In this assignment toward the end of the third quarter of instruction students recorded or even videotaped an older Latino person talking about the immigrant experience. The assignment is part of a larger oral history project in which universities in Miami and Southern California collaborate.<sup>5</sup> Students formulated the questions for the interview, transcribed the interview, and then used pertinent information for their own academic essays. At the same time, instruction emphasized different features of oral and written language that occurred in the different texts and genres students were reading and interacting with in class. From the perspective of academic language, for example, attention was devoted to the condensation of language in written genres, especially through the use of grammatical metaphor (GM) (Colombi, 2006), both in model texts and in their own production. GM can be characterized as a resource that condenses information by expressing experiences and events in an incongruent form, as contrasted with the more customary congruent form that prevails in everyday language use.

The occurrence of GM is a distinctive linguistic characteristic of Spanish academic texts, oral and written. Texts with a high degree of GM tend also to be considered prestigious in U.S. culture, and the use of GM is considered an essential marker of academic and professional-level literacy (Colombi, 2006). In Table 5, the highlighted phrases represent the GMs the authors used in the texts. Of particular interest are the different functions of GM, among them its function of deleting agents and actors from the scene or of removing indications of time. Looked at longitudinally in the development of students' writing, the use of GM symbolizes their movement from more oral to more written language (Colombi, 2002, 2006). Table 6 presents three examples from students' transcriptions and from the essays following the interviews. All indicate that students are learning to manipulate language in a way that moves from a more oral register to incorporating information in a more written way.

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<sup>5</sup> This project was spearheaded by Ana Roca at Florida International University, with the purpose of documenting the Latino immigrant experience throughout the United States.

<sup>6</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

The first two examples, both by Maira, show that in example 1, the transcription, she is recording what her interviewee said; by contrast, in example 2, she is incorporating that information as part of her thesis. (The use of GM is bolded). Example 3, by Rosalía, shows her able not only to use the information from her interview but also to integrate it with the material that she has been reading and using in class. Even as first drafts in a multiple version assignment examples 2 and 3 show how students can *learn language, through language and about language*, by focusing directly on the discourse semantic stages of each genre as well as on the lexicogrammatical features.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper I have highlighted the potential of Halliday's social theory of language for the development of college-level curricula and pedagogies that consider the language use characteristics and educational needs and goals of Spanish heritage learners in the United States. Heritage speakers of Spanish constitute a unique cultural and linguistic resource while also presenting particular challenges for language educators and language programs. Many heritage speakers have developed their heritage language (Spanish) in the family context but want to be able to use it in professional areas. SFL as a theoretical framework that was developed mostly in the educational context can provide useful tools for the development of advanced literacy of Spanish as a heritage language. SFL educational practices focus on language as a 'meaning-making resource,' always taking into consideration how language means in different contexts. As a result, curriculum developers and educational professionals but, more importantly, students can begin to see how different registers of language fulfill differing needs and intentions in different situations. For a language that continues to be interpreted as a minority language of lesser status and, by extension, for the speakers of that language who are thereby socially disadvantaged, an educational practice that replaces simplistic value judgments of language varieties and registers with a principled understanding of how language use construes social situations and in turn is construed by them such an educational approach can be both a liberating and an empowering experience.

To the extent that it explicitly fosters descriptive and productive instruction of language such an approach can also be understood as fostering advanced forms of literacies in the two languages available (English and Spanish) to these bilingual language users. In that case one of the curious and also counterproductive distinctions between heritage language instruction and foreign language instruction could begin to be overcome: both groups of learners are engaged in exploring the potential of their languages as meaning-making resources on the basis of heightened awareness of the discourse-semantic and lexicogrammatical features of diverse genres. Stated another way, they are moving along a continuum of language development that enlarges their registerial and generic repertoires, an ability that surely counts as one of the key descriptors of advanced language capacities, that is, of language capacities that enable their users to function in a range of social circumstances, including most particularly the academy, professional, and public life.

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