

## GLOBALIZED DISCOURSE TRENDS IN LOCAL CONTEXTS

ISOLDA E. CARRANZA

Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET)  
Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina

*This paper suggests links between macro- and micro-level phenomena like employment and consumption trends on the one hand, and on the other, the details of one-on-one communication, be it oral or multimodal. The globalization of recent discourse trends originating in the world of large business corporations is spurred by sociopolitical conditions created by institutional, provincial or national decision-making. Knowledge about the effects of grammatical structures, interactional mechanisms, conversational synchrony, and visual semiosis is systematically applied by local and transnational organizations and institutions. The calculated application of various resources (polarity questions, semantic presuppositions, inclusive 'we' and sympathetic performative utterances) will be shown in call centers training manuals, while material from a university school's institutional web page will illustrate the discussion on the appropriation and naturalization of the discourse and the aesthetics of marketing.*

*KEY WORDS:* institutional identity, multimodality, marketing, outsourcing, EFL speakers, reflexivity

Recibido: agosto 2007

Aceptado: noviembre 2007

### 1. VIGNETTES

A city in the southern cone of South America. A Spanish-speaking customer calls a service provider. The call is not answered with *Teletaxi, buenos días* (Teletaxi, good morning), but it includes the identification of the caller by first name, *Teletaxi. Mabel atiende*. (Mabel here). This innovative interactional feature which consists in putting forward the individual identity of the institutional representative has been adopted by local enterprises, though it was transnational companies' telemarketing that got customers used to, for example, *¿Puedo hablar con la Sra. Patricia Luchessi? Mi nombre es Ana, ¿cómo está usted?* (Can I talk to Mrs. Patricia Luchessi? My name is Ann, how are you?) After this personalized contact, the name of the promoted product, and the name of the company are mentioned.

Globalized, knowledge-based discourse trends materialize in the local contexts of a university town, Córdoba, in Argentina. Some of them involve speakers of English as a foreign language. The aspects of discourse trends that will be reviewed here concern reflexive applications of knowledge about communication, consumption of English-language products and institutional texts, and critique of products and discourse trends.

## 2. STATE POLICIES AND DISCURSIVE CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIOECONOMIC TRENDS

Employment of people with various degrees of English language training has been influenced by international, national and provincial factors, which are themselves related to one another. To begin with, the last ten years have witnessed major transformations in the labor market for English teachers. The number of private English bilingual schools rose considerably and the teaching of English in public schools increased spurred by the 1995 educational reform. That national policy established obligatory English teaching in middle school and opened three alternatives after that first cycle, two of them included a different foreign language and the third one consisted in teaching only English throughout secondary education. Despite the availability of three formats and in line with the dominant views in education and economy, most schools chose to extend the teaching of English mostly to the detriment of instruction in French, the other traditional language course. We got to see some public school French teachers who went through a sort of labor reconversion process and turned to teaching Portuguese, or Spanish as a foreign language, or other school subjects such as Crafts. This tendency motivated the resistance of university teachers of languages other than English, as revealed in the title of research projects and conference papers. Ten years after the implementation of that national policy, the current national government tacitly admits the hegemony of English in the public school system, for example, by publishing on the Ministry of Education web page an optimistic celebration of diversity on the occasion of the inauguration of a single French program in a very small town of the province of Buenos Aires (July 19, 2005).

A related local trend which is more recent and increasingly strong is the employment of non-native speakers of English in the provision of outsourced services, particularly in translation companies and call centers which benefit from the existence of a large university program in English and from the fact that the city of Córdoba is in a convenient time zone for American consumers. Call centers are offices which receive telephone inquiries or complaints from customers of a certain business company. At present, they are no longer a division of a company, but a separate organization, and as such, they can be physically located miles away from the company in question. Outsourcing occurs when a firm subcontracts a business function to an outside supplier. The reduction of communication costs and the standardization of software packages have now made it possible to outsource business functions such as customer service, telemarketing, document management, financial services and the generation of computer software. Discourse analysts have become interested in call centers because

the telephone interactions between customers and the representatives of the service provider are carefully regulated and monitored (Cameron 2000). In what follows outsourced call centers will provide the basis to discuss the calculated application of knowledge about language in using language.

### 2.1 *Knowledge-based engineering of discourse by businesses*

The establishment of branches of transnational companies and outsourced service-providers comes along with the dissemination of their set of prescriptions for their employees' verbal and non-verbal conduct. The adopted behavior may involve text types (like mail messages in the Intranet), discourse styles, or sequential organization features in verbal interaction. Argentine customers have got used to relatively new features in verbal routines in their contact with service providers such as credit card companies and local telephone companies. Those features can be traced back to the recommended sequences internationally enforced by large companies.

This is easily recognized as an instance of what has been described in the following terms: "Discourse becomes commodified –it becomes open to processes of calculation, it comes to be designed for success on markets" (Fairclough 1999: 77). The shape this takes in Córdoba, Argentina, is illustrated below with an extract from the training manual in English being used at present by a firm which offers Customer Service contact for the customers of some American phone companies.

#### “Opening

**Thank you for calling** (Name of the company). **My name is** (your name). *How can I help today?*

#### Rapport

*Who do I have the pleasure of speaking with today?*

#### Diagnosis and Resolution

(omitted)

#### Closing

*Let me go over what I did for you today.* (Summarize actions taken). **Is there anything else I can assist you with?** *Mr./Mrs. Smith, thank you for being a* (Name of the company) *customer. We really appreciate your business. Have a great day*" (Updated Script, October 2004, p. 1).

In a telephone interaction in the Argentine speech community the expected position for thanking tends to be near the end of the interaction because it serves as a pre-closing move. However, in the training manual thanking is fronted to the opening move in the interaction. Trainees are instructed to model their contributions on this sequence where the company representative identifies herself or himself by name; then, once the first transaction is over, a pass is made to create the opportunity to develop a new sequence, and thanking takes place a second time. In order to perceive the rehearsed quality that future interactions modeled on this one will have, it is useful to notice

that the employees are not simply instructed to be polite. They are given the actual formulae that are to serve as indicators of politeness.

The ways the English language is used by non-native speakers in call centers are of interest to discourse analysts not only because those ways are becoming standardized, globalized, and adopted in the provision of services in other languages, and not only because large numbers of people are intensely being taught English to qualify for those jobs, but especially because the training of employees and the employees' actual professional practice display the application of knowledge about communication, discourse, conversation and grammar. In the following extract from another training manual in English, we can see how knowledge of the mechanics of verbal interaction gets applied in two exhortations that pave the way for interacting successfully.

“Intervene

It helps to clarify the story.

It confirms that you and the client are talking about the same thing.

It reorients the communication.

Use interjections

They are listening signals.

They encourage the client to talk.

They support what the client is saying.

They create empathy” (Welcome to New Agent Training, April 2005, no page number).

What the training manual calls “interjections” is what conversation analysts have called “back-channeling behavior.” It consists in the production of a brief turn made up of fixed expressions such as *Right, I see*, or verbal noises such as *hum*, which do not add new ideational content so much as contribute to develop the interaction and support the participant who has the floor. Let us notice that compliance with these prescriptions amount to avoiding long monologues by the customer as well as avoiding silence. Letting customers speak too extensively or in a rambling way would not be an efficient use of the employee's time, while letting customers go on talking without an indication that they are being understood would be perceived as frustrating. Therefore, the aim of the training is getting the company representative to learn how to control the interaction.

In the process of socialization, children learn the complex mechanics of turn-taking and as they grow up, they continue to develop skills of interactional management. However, what is at play in the cases we are examining is the deliberate planning and rehearsal of tactics that are known to induce certain responses. Much in the same way that self-help books prescribe interactional routines for successful job interviews or satisfactory negotiations with a romantic partner, businesses impose training in calculated turns at talk which ensure control of the customer's conversational contributions and of the direction of the interaction.

## 2.2 Knowledge of the interactional effects of grammar

Discourse analysts have described the strategic use of polarity questions in institutional settings such as the courtroom (Berk-Seligson 1999, Rigney 1999, Heritage 2002, Wang 2006). Unlike *wh-* questions which are frequent in direct examination and let the respondent expand on the issue, Yes-No questions are deliberately used in cross-examinations because they strictly limit the response options for the witness of the opposite party. Similarly, courtroom discourse displays abundant exploitation of a phenomenon triggered by grammar: presupposition. Thus, the “responsibility trap” in asking the defendant a leading question such as *When did you stop beating your wife?* consists in a property of the verb “to stop” –the property of triggering the implicit proposition “you used to beat your wife”, which is not cancelled by any answer made relevant by the word “when”. In the same way, the adverb “again”, for example, always triggers the presupposition that this is not the first time that the state of affairs (predicated by the sentence which contains it) takes place. Mechanisms of this sort are deployed knowledgeably and strategically in business communication as this fragment shows:

### “Direct approach

Should we go ahead and get your order started?

### Assumptive approach

*All I will need to do is double check some of the information on your Long Distance account before we finalize your (Name of product) order; (Name of the customer).*

If the customer feels any reluctance at this point, it’s up to her or him to stop and ask questions”. (Participant Guide, April 2004, p. 20).

Subordinate time clauses trigger the presupposition that the proposition they contain is in fact the case. Thus, instead of asking “Do you wish to order this product?”, the employee is to say *before we finalize your (X) order*, which presupposes that that is what she or he will do. Knowledge of the effects of grammatical constructions is applied as a planned strategy to bring out the desired interactional outcomes. In case anyone attempted a naive interpretation according to which the choice of grammatical structures by the manual writers is arbitrary or a mere coincidence, in the manual itself we can find corroboration of the deliberate application of interactional control features:

### “Control the conversation

- Assume the sale by using an assumptive approach.
- Ask closed-ended questions.” (Participant Guide, April 2004, p. 8)

Along the same lines, we can review what conversational analysis has revealed about the pragmatic and interactional effects of question tags, and then observe their presence in these instructional materials. With confirmation requests, the indicated speaker expectations are not equally distributed between an affirmative and a negative answer. What becomes relevant as a preferred second part is a confirmatory answer. Likewise,

tags added to evaluative statements assume shared knowledge and beliefs, and turn an assertion into a request for agreement. In general, the assumption underlying use of tags is that the addressee and the addresser share a common point of view. In the interpersonal plane of discourse, the effect is that the speaker aligns herself or himself closer to the addressee. Four turns prescribed in one manual and reproduced here will show that this resource is used strategically.

1. “Recommending an All-Inclusive Plan

*Per minute Long Distance and Local Toll charges are a thing of the past! With the (Name of plan) Plan, you will receive unlimited Local, Local Toll AND domestic Long Distance calls from home - making it easier **to stay in touch with the ones who matter most to you!** And, you'll get 5 popular features: Call Waiting, Caller ID, Three-way Calling, Speed Dial, and Voicemail! All this for \$5.95 per month, plus applicable taxes and surcharges! Sounds great, **doesn't it?**”* (Participant Guide, p. 14).

The first utterance in bold letters triggers a presupposition which alludes to certain social values and lifestyle. We can account for the presence of the question tag in this model business transaction under the light of its use in another type of interaction: conversation. In the verbal routines typical of everyday conversation, where the communicative goal is mere social contact, tags tend to trigger the addressee's agreement almost automatically as the result of participant's tendency to maintain conversational synchrony. In the business talk of the example, *doesn't it?* would routinely be followed by addressee's agreement.

2. “Recommending an All-Inclusive Plan

*You sound like **someone that would appreciate the simplicity** of one low rate for ALL your calls from home: State-to-state, Instate, and Local Toll. 5 cents a minute, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for all those calls is a pretty good rate, **don't you think?** What if I told you I could give you that rate for all your Long Distance calls for a low \$5.95 a month? Why don't **we** get you signed-up so you can begin saving as soon as possible?”* (Participant Guide, p. 14).

The quality of the product gets associated to the customer and to the customer's lifestyle. A question tag is employed here too. Finally, in the last utterance, “we” is not an exclusive “we” meaning “we the phone company”, but an inclusive “we” which grants the addressee the status of agent of the action and functions as an addressee-involving mechanism. Formulating the step taken as if it was a joint action evokes a position from which the process can be influenced and decided upon.

3. “Customer doesn't want Voicemail but it is included in the plan

***I understand** that Voicemail may not be a high priority for you at this time. **As we discussed,** you would benefit from receiving unlimited Local, Local Toll and Long Distance calling, **right?** Besides, I think you'll find Voicemail is more convenient than an answering machine because you can receive messages while you're on the phone*

or using the Internet. **Let's go ahead and get you set up with this plan today, OK?**" (Participant Guide, p.17)

We can see that the toolkit for persuasion includes the expression of empathy (*I understand*), implicit content contained in a subordinate clause (*as we discussed*), use of question tags (*right? OK?*), and choice of a grammatical structure with inclusive "us" (*Let's*).

4. "Calling Plan Fee Increase. (Customer claims overcharging) How to deny credit. Mr./Mrs. (Name of customer), ***I do understand*** your concern. ***While there was an increase associated with your Plan***, please know that you will continue to have one of the most competitive Plans in the Long Distance industry. ***Because your Plan was billed correctly***, credit will not be issued. If you prefer though, ***I can help you*** choose another Savings Plan that would suit your needs." (Participant Guide, p. 19).

This model rejection of a customer's request that trainees are made to rehearse displays a formulaic expression of empathy (*I do understand*) as well as the exploitation of the following semantic elements: a positive action associated to the company representative (*help*) and presuppositions –in the clause starting with *while* the presupposition is "there was an increase" and in the clause starting with *because* the presupposition is "the bill is correct".

American business experts dismiss complaints that are made in the U.S. against offshore outsourcing by arguing that the jobs which migrate offshore are predominantly those that can be viewed as requiring relatively low skill while innovation and deep business expertise, which generate high wages and drive the economy of a country, will continue to be predominantly on-shore. American offshore outsourcing is likely to increase in the next decade and estimates are that its volume will increase by 30 or 40 percent a year for the next five years (Drezner 2004). From the perspective of discourse studies and from the point of view of the Argentine non-native speakers of English, this is significant because it is one additional indication that we are likely to participate in globalized knowledge-based discourse trends. As a result, awareness of the mechanisms and the workings of discourse is in order.

The theoretical interest of the deliberate tailoring of communication that we have observed lies in the fact that it is just one of the ways in which the increasing reflexivity of contemporary society gets manifested. The concept of reflexivity, as it was used by the sociologist Anthony Giddens, indicates the use of knowledge about social life in the organization of social life (Giddens 1991). Such knowledge is obtained, for example, through research in psychology, anthropology, science, and communication studies. The outstanding levels of its advances allow for various strategic applications, of which a familiar case is the planned uses of psychological insights in manager-subordinates relationships in business organizations or in the process of screening candidates for a job. Call centers training manuals reveal that knowledge about interactional dynamics, semantic presupposition, and conversational synchrony is reflexively applied to shape communication and direct it towards the knowledgeable party's ends.

Fairclough (1989) offers linguistic analyses of one type of reflexive application of discourse which was described by Michel Foucault with the term 'technologies.' Questionnaires, surveys, interviews, tests, and forms to be filled up can be considered technologies. A wider phenomenon, which Fairclough (1995) called technologisation of discourse, involves the redesign of discursive practices of social institutions and organizations in accordance with particular strategies and objectives. This strategic design of discourse can be observed in types of texts such as those analyzed in this paper and gets disseminated due to educational and employment conditions.

Examination of discourse practices in force at call centers does not lead to the conclusion that there is a transference of linguistic usage from the genre 'conversation' to the genre 'business transaction', but to the realization that they display a careful design of oral discourse and apply specialized knowledge about verbal interaction and the interactional effects of grammar not necessarily shared by the non-corporate participant.

Because call centers are sources of new jobs and tend to hire young people, an age group that has been particularly hit by unemployment, state policies are in place to boost their business. The National Labor Ministry paid the School of Languages of the National University of Córdoba for the training of over 1,100 people who are potential employees of a single call centre company (among several located in Córdoba), while in March 2005 the provincial government granted gross income tax exemption for ten years to ten foreign firms in the call centre and web hosting line of business. Unfortunately, a year later employees' dissatisfaction with working conditions, salary, and benefits led to measures of direct action and street demonstrations<sup>1</sup>.

An aspect that is not part of the analytical interests here is the relationship between these interactional techniques and local discursive practices. A clash between them may result in the instructions not being followed by the employees (Houtkoop-Steenstra 2000). Likewise, the scope of this paper does not include the question of whether there is a transfer of communicative habits from business telephone calls to outside the work environment.

### 3. NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS AS CONSUMERS

Recitals by British or American bands at large stadiums in Buenos Aires have the entire audience follow the lyrics. There are indications that the consumers of popular culture in English are more and more numerous, and younger. On July 22, 2005, the sixth volume of the Harry Potter saga sold out in Buenos Aires in one day the 9,000 copies in English that came to Argentina. It was the first time a book in a foreign language was the top best-seller in this country.

<sup>1</sup> In an interview published in a local paper in 2006, the Secretary of the recently created "Sindicato de Teleoperadores" estimated that 12,000 people worked in telemarketing in Córdoba and the total for Argentina was 45,000.

A further instance of increased offer of products is the fact that international English language examinations have proliferated and come in all formats<sup>2</sup>. The EFL industry has turned younger age groups into target consumers, some as young as children aged from 7 to 12. For example, the exam called “Young Learners (3 levels) Starters, Movers, and Flyers” caters to six-year-olds. Furthermore, the huge global market of textbook publishing, where large business companies take over smaller ones and where there are mergers of giant companies, involves local university graduates as local representatives of multinational publishing houses.

It is paradoxical that, although teachers are a crucial link in the chain that connects these commodities and the students who consume them, their position in the structure of contemporary Argentine society is characterized by low salaries and their status has been considerably reduced in the last decades. They may be considered to possess cultural capital, but status comes from the consumption of other commodities for which English is just a vehicle.

In the following section, the focus will be placed on the design of a website which is regularly accessed by an extremely large number of non-native English speakers from Córdoba and from neighboring provinces –they are the students in the English program at the National University of Córdoba– and a considerable proportion of them are the same individuals who work at call centers and are trained with the manuals analyzed in section 2.2. The argument that links the treatment of the various kinds of data in this paper is that the described customer service training, the increase in English product consumption including English proficiency credentials, and the School of Languages website are three local manifestations of a global norm which expresses the values, strategies, interpersonal relationships and aesthetics of marketing. The diversity of data in this paper is meant to illustrate the uncritical acceptance or adoption, and the spread of the observed tendency spurred by existing social, economic and political conditions.

<sup>2</sup> Here is a list of only some of the exams that are administered in the city of Córdoba at present.

KET Key English Test

PET Preliminary English Test

FCE First Certificate in English

CAE Certificate in Advanced English

CPE Certificate of Proficiency in English

IGCSE International General Certificate of Secondary Education

BEC Business English Certificate at three levels, Preliminary, Vantage and Higher

TSE Test of Spoken English

G-TELP General Tests of English Language Proficiency at five levels

TWE Test of Written English. (Taken with TOEFL)

ECPE Examination for the Certificate of Proficiency in English. (Usually taken by teachers and advanced students)

ECECE Examination for the Certificate of Elementary Competency. (For Argentina and Uruguay). Average students' age: 12

TOEIC Test of English for International Communication. (Business communication).

### 3.1 *The discourse of marketing*

The analytical focus applied so far in this paper was basically limited to texts. What follows focuses on discourses, in the Foucaultian sense (e.g. Angenot 1982, Fraser 1989, Verón et al. 1987), and is built on the tenet that texts manifest the distribution, circulation, reproduction or combination of discourses.

As we know, texts can be concrete instantiations or realizations of the discourse of the domain they belong to. Thus, the concept of discourse as a count noun is understood as a configuration of meanings, values and beliefs typically linked to a social field or worldview (Kress 1989). In addition, in a given text we can find other discourses being echoed, appropriated, reproduced or responded to (Bakhtin 1981, Fairclough 1992 among many). This is another way in which texts are historically situated. This section addresses relations between discourses in that a given discourse may be found to contaminate or predominate over another, or several others in society.

The relationship between discourse and the social, economic, geographical, historical and cultural coordinates where it is produced and received comprises not just conceptual elements, but also formal elements. Some forms, modes and media prevail in a given historical period. For example, unlike more recent historical periods, the Late Middle Ages was a time in which multimodality in painting was not rare (Williamson 2005). In contemporary society, discourses are increasingly constituted in multisemiotic ways (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 1997). Given the current historical conditions and the state of information technology, we consume and produce texts which are not just multimodal, but multilinear and interactive. For example, those generated by using some computer software and by surfing the net by hopping from one link to another of our choice in a non-linear, non-obligatory path.

In order to address this reality, in what follows I examine Internet texts from <http://www.lenguas.unc.edu.ar/>. The analysis is aimed at highlighting the intersection and combination of discourses in a single text with the overwhelming predominance of one discourse and at pointing out, though extremely briefly, the local versions of global discourse trends with regard to identity construction.

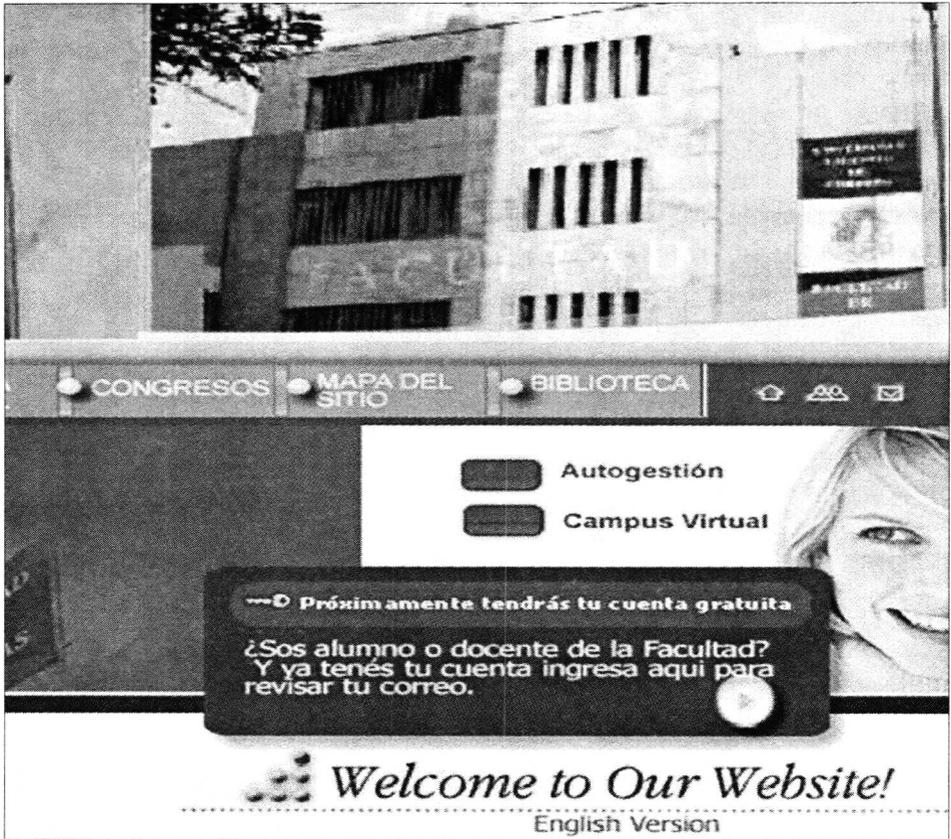


Image 1. [WEB PAGE 1] Welcoming page for the School of Languages at the National University of Córdoba web site (partial reproduction focusing on right top corner).

The woman's face on the first page of the web site offers a welcoming smile and looks straight at the Internet user. The woman's head orientation as well as the presence of her image and that of the institutional building on the same page link both in a relationship of identification. This does not imply simplistically that meanings expressed iconically, such as youth, beauty, friendliness, and femininity, are predicated about the institution in a naïve or direct way. It does imply that those meanings are evaluated as indexing a type of social identity which lends itself to institutional applications. The added interest of this multimodal text is that the human phenotype—extremely pale complexion, whitish blond hair and clear blue eyes—is rather distant from the average Cordobese. Whereas a linguistic text (left top corner *Universidad Nacional de Córdoba* which has been left out of the reproduction above for reasons of space) explicitly locates the represented building physically in Córdoba, the woman's face sends the interpreter to a different semiotic location, one in which the image can systematically co-occur with meanings of other discourses of consumption.

In the utterances guiding the user to the e-mail server, there is an additional mismatch between the institutional character of the web page and the extremely informal register employed. *¿Sos alumno o docente de la facultad?* (Are you a student or a teacher of this school?) *Y ya tenés tu cuenta* (And you already have an account). This counts as a question, but the interrogation marks are missing. *ingresá aquí para revisar tu correo* (Enter here to check your mail). This is a separate utterance but the text producer has failed to capitalize the first word. The Spanish distinction tú/usted –comparable to the French tu/vous and the Italian tu/lei– for the singular, second person pronoun is also manifest in the verb endings. The verb conjugation in the text above is in the second person singular, *sos* (are you) *tenés* (you have) *ingresá* (enter [Imp.]), in the Argentine variety of Spanish and in the intimate, familiar form. This feature is compatible with the advertising style typically employed to promote products catering for the very young.



Image 2. [WEB PAGE 2] The Graduate Centre web page.

When we choose the link to the Graduates Centre, we find the image of four people in the top area of the page. Their remarkable stylistic homogeneity contributes to make style stand out. All four of the young adults display shared semiotic elements, a few of which will be mentioned here. The plain white, grey or black clothes, particularly

the man's white shirt and dark tie, are evocative of corporate settings. The women have identical sober hairdo and modern hair colouring, and don't wear any jewelry, scarves or other ornaments. Features which are not shared, such as the third woman's glasses and no smile on the man's face, are perfectly compatible with those just mentioned and combine to evoke the image of the expert that circulates in advertising discourse. In the far background, a desk and a computer complete the corporate office ambiance. One approach to this representation of the graduates is to argue that members of that community in Córdoba are equipped with the interpretative means to perceive a mismatch between the signifier (the semiotic forms we are reviewing) and the signified (in this case, being a graduate of the university programs offered). But more important than that is the easily recognizable provenance of the semiotic resources found in this text. They are prototypical of the discourse of advertising and marketing, with its stereotypes of success in a clerical job. Argentine public educational institutions specializing in language do not need to add up to the contemporary hegemony of the discourse of marketing. The discourse of educational institutions can draw on a variety of semiotic resources and meanings which may come from the fields of education, translation, citizenship, science, civil society, communication, and culture, among others.

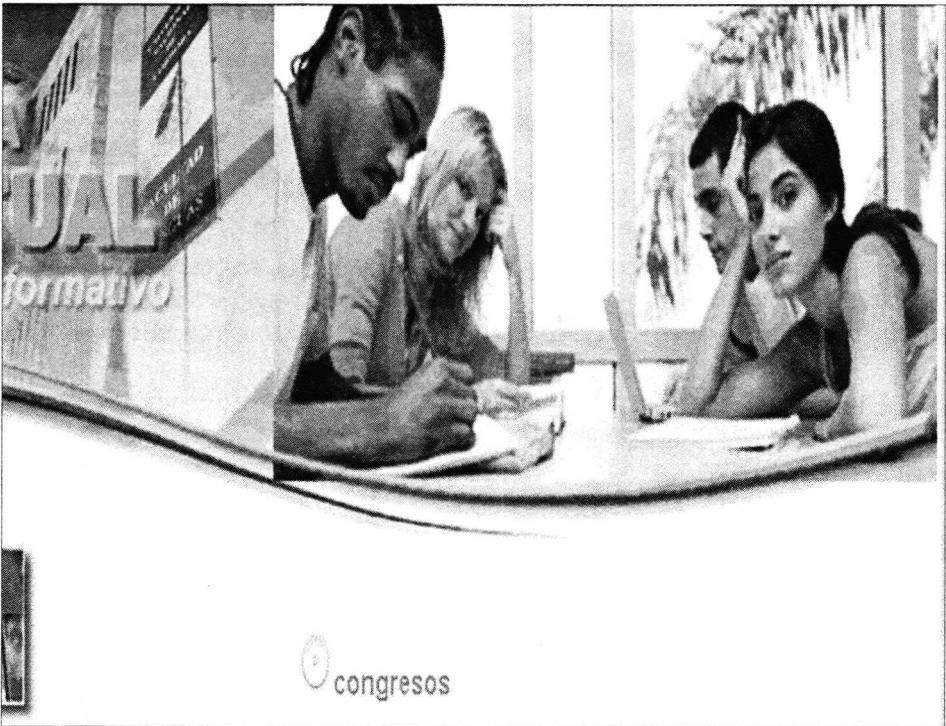


Image 3. [WEB PAGE 3] The "Virtual Agenda" page.

Inclusion of a dark man with dreadlocks as dictated by public discourse trends in the developed countries of the northern hemisphere might result in placing the visual text closer to Benetton's calculated celebration of ethnic diversity<sup>3</sup>. This use of ethnic diversity à la Benetton on the web page above may actually create a gap between the text interpreters at a public university in inland Argentina. If necessary in a representation of our university life, diversity would be better captured by including pictures of Córdoba-born students as well as students from the provinces of Jujuy, Salta, La Rioja, Santiago del Estero, or San Luis, for example, who flock to Córdoba for higher education.

The image of library space availability and facilities evokes an American atmosphere which is being circulated and used as universal. The representation of a university library with wide windows, a blond woman making eye contact, a student using the number-two black pencil which is typically available on desk counters in the USA, and especially with a male student working on his notepad computer is very far from resembling the local reality. Even an unrealistic representation could well have evoked content originating in the text producer's imagination instead of picking up an equally local, but alien, and American-flavored scene. Choosing the latter contributes to the hegemony of a globalized, apparently non-culturally specific discourse of marketing with the concomitant provider-customer relationships it intrinsically indexes<sup>4</sup>.

Analysis of multimodal discourse can benefit from an insight gained by Halliday's theory of a semiotic system we know relatively well: language. The crucial consequence of adopting a multifunctional theory of language like Systemic Functional Linguistics is that every text is viewed as having ideational, interpersonal and textual dimensions (Halliday 1978, 1985). Therefore, even if a given component can predominate in certain language uses or at certain points in a text, all three macrofunctions get realized. The implication for the analysis of discourse which becomes relevant in the present discussion is that interpersonal meanings are always present, even in texts aimed to inform and not typically recognized as means to establish social contact. The interpersonal dimension must be examined in its contribution to establishing identities and social relationships (Fairclough 1992). If we extrapolate to multimodal discourse these identity-constitutive and social relationship constitutive functions, it must be acknowledged that the multimodal texts just examined do not simply give information while making the reading less boring by displaying images. These multimodal texts index social and institutional relationships. Rather than being built on the values

<sup>3</sup> The best known advertising campaign of the clothes manufacturer Benetton consisted in pictures of people of the most varied ethnic backgrounds. The message is "Everybody wears our clothes".

<sup>4</sup> This spread of an international business quality in verbal and visual communication within non-commercial organizations (and state bodies like town halls) or educational institutions may seem to some a mechanism that furthers the homogenization of culture by anchoring texts and images in an unspecified location and providing them with transnational semiotic elements. However, that is not the argument developed here. The view defended here is that the described elements of meaning (allegedly from nowhere) express social relationships typical of business transactions.

of learning and citizenship, the relationship between the educational institution and the student evoked by these web pages, expresses a desire of the former to allure the latter with a youthful, friendly image and induce them to consume surrounded by glamour and beauty.

#### 4. FINAL REMARKS: RESISTING KNOWLEDGE-BASED TRENDS WITH MORE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DISCOURSE

The various social actors directly involved in educational institutions in general or the social actors who consume the products provided by such institutions have an increased level of discourse awareness deriving from their experience in society. It is desirable that they apply it to produce, reproduce, transform and circulate meanings of their choice and expressive of locally constructed identities and relationships.

A hegemonic discourse has the capacity to constitute the given, that is, the meanings that are taken for granted, the realities that are claimed to be inevitable, or the significations that become invisible because they are naturalized. In fact, regarding trends some people may tend to deny their existence, others may believe that “that’s just the way things are”, and others may hurry to be on the frontline of the trend. However, the most liberating and autonomous response to hegemonic discourses is to see through them and produce a unique configuration and combination of semiotic elements. Fairclough points to this when he states:

“It is on the basis of (...) understandings of how discourse works within social practices that people can come to question and look beyond existing discourses, or existing relations of dominance and marginalization between discourses, and so advance knowledge.” (Fairclough 1999: 75)

Given that information technology provides an extraordinary array of materials and resources for the distribution of discourses, and given that the potential for creative fusions, overlaps and transformations of semiotic elements is enormous, then, all that can be put to use in the production of local meanings and in the projection of identities –identities which may be complex, fragmentary, multiple, dynamic, but still the result of deliberately chosen combinations and collectively appropriated meanings, instead of ready-made packages.

Awareness that English is a vehicle for the marketing of other commodities, from computers to international exams, can lead English teachers to deliberately choose to contribute to stimulate consumption or to choose not to do so. English in Argentina is itself a commodity, promoted and marketed, around which the interests of big business are at stake. English favours cultural globalization by easing out the dissemination of cultural products, sets of beliefs, discourses, and “pre-packaged” ways of carrying out verbal activities, which circulate with assumed cultural neutrality.

We have long been aware of the need to put textbooks under scrutiny for representation of reality they offer. The history book written by George Macaulay Trevelyan, first published in 1942 by Longmans, Green & Co., reprinted every year since

1959 by Pelican, and used for decades at the local English program referred to India and “cultural globalization” with the paragraph below which contains the following underlying reasoning: If Indians had not read about freedom in British poetry and political philosophy, they would not have demanded Independence.

The teaching of English involved, however, certain **dangers** which subsequent generations did not take the right means to avoid. An energetic white race, trained in all the uses of self-government for centuries past, and assuming self-discipline and public order as things granted and certain, naturally lays stress in its poetry and its political philosophy on **freedom** as the crown of life. (Trevelyan 1959: 505) (bold letters not in the original)

We laugh at this fear of “the dangers of educating too much”, but once we acknowledge its distance from our outlook on the present trends, it can be taken to point in the same direction as the data in this paper: Globalization does not simply colonize people; it also makes available the means for critique.

## REFERENCES

- ANGENOT, M. 1982. *La parole pamphlétaire: Une typologie des discours modernes*. Paris: Payot.
- BAKHTIN, M. 1981. *The dialogic imagination*. Trans. by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- BERK-SELIGSON, S. 1999. The impact of court interpreting on the coerciveness of leading questions. *Forensic Linguistics* 6 (1): 30-56.
- CAMERON, D. 2000. *Good to talk? Living and working in a communication culture*. London: Sage.
- DREZNER, D. 2004. The outstanding bogeyman. *Foreign Affairs* 83 (3): 22-34.
- FAIRCLOUGH, N. 1989. *Language and power*. London/New York: Longman.
- FAIRCLOUGH, N. 1992. *Discourse and social change*. London: Polity Press.
- FAIRCLOUGH, N. 1995. Technologicalisation of discourse. In R. Caldas-Coulthard and M. Coulthard (Eds.), *Texts and practices: Readings in critical discourse analysis*. London: Routledge.
- FAIRCLOUGH, N. 1999. Global capitalism and critical awareness of language. *Language Awareness* 8 (2): 71-83.
- FRASER, N. 1989. *Unruly practices: Power, discourse and gender in contemporary social theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- GIDDENS, A. 1991. *Modernity and self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- HALLIDAY, M.A.K. 1978. *Language as social semiotic*. London: Arnold.
- HALLIDAY, M.A.K. 1985. *Introduction to functional grammar*. London: Arnold.
- HERITAGE, J. 2002. The limits of questions: Negative interrogatives and hostile question content. *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (10-11): 1427-1446.
- HOUTKOOP-STEENSTRA, H. 2000. *Interaction and the standardized interview. The living questionnaire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- KRESS, G. 1989. *Linguistic processes in sociocultural practice*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- KRESS, G. AND T. VAN LEEUWEN. 1996. *Reading images. The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge.
- KRESS, G. AND T. VAN LEEUWEN. 1997. *The multimodal text*. London: Arnold.
- RIGNEY, A. 1999. Questioning in interpreted testimony. *Forensic Linguistics* 6 (1): 83-108.
- TREVELYAN, G. M. 1959. *A shortened history of England*. London: Pelican.

- VERÓN, E., L. ARFUCH, M. M. CHIRICO, AND E. DE ÍPOLA. 1987. *El discurso político: Lenguajes y acontecimientos*. Buenos Aires: Hachette.
- WANG, J. 2006. Questions and the exercise of power. *Discourse & Society* 17 (4): 529-548.
- WILLIAMSON, R. 2005. "¿A qué le llamamos discurso en una perspectiva multimodal? Los desafíos de una nueva semiótica". 6th Conference of the Latin American Association of Discourse Studies. Santiago de Chile.