

# CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE ACROSS SPANISH PROFICIENCY LEVELS

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## ABSTRACT

The conversations written by participants across five different Spanish proficiency levels are analyzed with respect to the realization of communicative acts, grammatical problems and accuracy rates, language forms used in formulating particular acts, and the incorporation of particular textual devices. The production of the three major types of acts tends to follow a developmental pattern across proficiency levels. The use of deictic markers and co-referential links is affected by language competence. By relying on their knowledge of L1 discourse principles, L2 Spanish learners can participate in conversations from the beginning levels.

**KEY WORDS:** Communicative competence in L2, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, pragmatics.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza conversaciones en español escritas por participantes pertenecientes a cinco niveles de competencia comunicativa, en base a la realización de actos comunicativos, problemas gramaticales y grado de precisión, formas lingüísticas utilizadas en la formulación de algunos actos y la incorporación de determinados mecanismos textuales. La producción de los tres tipos principales de actos tiende a reflejar un patrón evolutivo a través de los niveles de competencia. El uso de marcadores deícticos y lazos correferenciales está condicionado por la competencia lingüística. A través del conocimiento del discurso en L1, los estudiantes de español como L2 participan en conversaciones desde niveles básicos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** competencia comunicativa en L2, análisis de la conversación, análisis del discurso, pragmática.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language use in interactive situations has attracted scholarly attention over the years. Some linguists have approached the topic from the perspective of discourse analysis (Brown & Yule; Coulthard; McCarthy; Schiffrrin; van Dijk; McGroarty). Others have addressed the topic within the dynamics of conversa-

tional discourse and pragmatic concerns (Mey; Grundy; Yule; Verschuren). Conversations are examples of spoken discourse (Edmondson) and spoken interaction (Stenstrom) since they involve linguistic interaction between two or more persons who engage collaboratively in producing contextualized meaning (Verschuren).

## 2. FEATURES OF CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE

Conversations have structural properties, rules for speaking, and ways for generating meaning and managing topics (Schegloff; Sacks; Pomerantz & Fehr; Tusón Valls). Conversational discourse includes “transactional” language for transmitting information and “interactional” speech for expressing social relations and personal attitudes (Brown & Yule). Conversation analysts have focused on such aspects as the realization of communicative acts (apologies, refusals, requests), adjacency pairs (greeting>greeting, question>answer, offer>accept/decline), speaker turn-taking organization, repairs, topical coherence, narrative structure, intonation patterns and discourse markers.

The analysis of conversational discourse is problematic since one is dealing with complex relationships between language, action, knowledge, and situation (Stubbs). Ill-formed utterances from a logical point of view might be acceptable in conversations. Knowledge of appropriate language use in different contexts (school, funerals, weddings, doctor’s office, service encounters), which might be seen as part of one’s sociolinguistic repertoire, may not be acquired until late in life. The distance between some surface language forms might differ significantly from the underlying social meanings. For example, the statement “It is hot in here” might be uttered by a speaker as an indirect means of commanding a hearer to open a window in the room.

Conversational discourse has been characterized as a multi-level system involving such categories as topic, speaking turns, interactional patterns and communicative acts. The framework developed by Sinclair & Coulthard for classroom language includes five discourse categories which are organized according to a hierarchical model: lesson>transaction>exchange> move>act. Each category is defined in terms of the elements of the structure, possible structures and types of classes. A central feature of this model is the notion of discourse function which attempts to relate grammatical forms to “situation” and “tactics”. Thus, a “directive” as a discourse category functions as a “command” situationally and is realized tactically by the “imperative” form. The system proposed by Edmondson follows Sinclair & Coulthard’s model for analyzing teacher-pupil talk, and it is modified to depict two-party, face-to-face simulated conversations among German learners of English. The system highlights the underlying structure of conversational episodes by noting the sequence of interactional acts which serve to promote textual cohesion.

The model by Stenstrom is also a modification of Sinclair & Coulthard’s framework and incorporates the author’s own discourse categories based on data from the London-Lund Corpus of English. Stenstrom’s model consists of five hierarchical levels: transaction>exchange>turn> move>act. Of importance to the present



study is the classification system for communicative acts. Communicative acts are classified in terms of three interactional categories: primary acts (provide essential meaning); secondary acts (accompany and sometimes replace primary acts); and complementary acts (accompany but rarely replace primary acts). Complementary acts are particularly relevant in spontaneous conversations since they function as interactional signals and discourse markers which make the talk more “lively” and “personal” (Stenstrom 16-17).

### 3. CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

The development of conversational abilities in a second language has been an important research area in second language acquisition (SLA) studies. Beginning with Hymes’ notion of communicative competence, different conceptual frameworks have guided research efforts. Canale & Swain’s fourfold concept of communicative competence (grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic) influenced a number of studies (Wolfson & Judd; Scarcella, Andersen & Krashen). Bachman’s model focuses on organizational and pragmatic competence. Organization competence consists of grammatical and textual competence. Grammatical competence includes linguistic knowledge associated with language forms (vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology/graphology), while textual competence entails the knowledge of the conventions for connecting utterances or sentences to form a unified text. Pragmatic competence consists of illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. Illocutionary competence involves the knowledge of the pragmatic conventions required for producing specific language functions, and sociolinguistic competence consists of the knowledge required for producing appropriate language functions in a given social situation.

The focus on pragmatic competence has guided numerous studies usually described as interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka; Kasper; Gass & Houck; Kasper & Rose). Most studies on interlanguage pragmatics center on the production of communicative acts rather than on the development of pragmatic competence. Moreover, the majority of studies examine the production of communicative acts in isolation from face-to-face conversational situations. Markee argues that conversational analysis as a methodological approach offers valuable insights about the SLA process. Highly detailed transcripts of individual behavior during conversational situations provide vital details about the SLA process which are lost with quantitative, experimental research methods.

### 4. THE PRESENT STUDY

A few studies have addressed the development of conversational discourse in L2 Spanish. The studies have focused on such aspects as speech act performance (Koike, “Pragmatic”), pragmatic awareness (Koike, “Transfer”), formulation of complements (Nelson & Hall), development of pragmatic knowledge (Ramírez) and



learning of conversational routines (Taylor). This study describes the development of conversational discourse across Spanish proficiency levels in the context of a conversational situation. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to describe conversational performance. The conversational abilities of Spanish users at five proficiency levels are characterized according to (1) the number and types of communicative acts; (2) grammatical problems encountered in language use; (3) language forms used in communicative acts; and (4) textual devices used for reference and connectivity.

#### 4.1. PARTICIPANTS

Participants at five different Spanish language levels were involved in the study. The participants in the four non-native groups were enrolled in a Spanish language course at the time of the data collection. Students at the Basic Spanish level had completed three to four semesters of college Spanish. Students at the Intermediate Spanish level had completed five to six courses of college Spanish. Students at the Advanced Spanish level were majoring or minoring in Spanish, having completed at least seven or eight courses. Those at the Superior Spanish level were Spanish majors completing the last semester of language study. The Superior group included students who identified themselves as being from Hispanic backgrounds or who had a cultural immersion experience in a Spanish-speaking country for at least one semester. The Native Speaker group consisted of graduate and undergraduate students born and educated in Spanish-speaking countries. All of the subjects (N = 25, 5 at each level) participated on a voluntary basis.

The participants were selected from a larger sample pool of ten subjects from each proficiency level. The initial sample of ten students at each of the four non-native groups was established on the basis of teachers' recommendations, test performance and student self-assessment of Spanish proficiency. These criteria were used to insure the linguistic homogeneity for each of the four levels involving non-native speakers.

#### 4.2. CONVERSATIONAL SITUATION

The participants were asked to complete a guided dialogue sequence involving various conversation acts. A written conversation format was chosen over spoken discourse in order to capture methodically vital details of interactional language across proficiency levels. At the same time, the use of a written dialogue might be particularly relevant for examining meta-pragmatic awareness or reflexive awareness regarding the linguistic choices which language users make in given situations. Verschuren argues that "reflexive awareness may be so central that it could be regarded as one of the original evolutionary prerequisites for the development of language" (187-188). The conversational situation is presented below.



*Situation:* Robert and Consuelo are friends. One Friday afternoon they meet outside the college library and discuss their plans for the evening.

*Directions:* Write a dialogue about what they would say to each other in the blanks provided. Use the conversational sequence as a guide following the numerical order.

**Roberto**

1. Greet Consuelo.  
*Hola Consuelo. ¿Cómo estás?*
4. Say that you have no definite plans.
6. Ask about the film.
8. Say “no” and give a reason.
10. Agree.
12. Agree and end the conversation

**Consuelo**

2. Acknowledge Roberto’s greeting.
3. Ask about his plans for the evening.
5. Suggest going to see a movie.
7. Give information about the film.
9. Suggest an alternative.
11. Suggest a time and a place to meet.

4.3. FRAMEWORK FOR CONVERSATIONAL ANALYSIS

The classification of conversational acts according to primary, secondary and complementary acts follows the framework developed by Stenstrom. Primary acts, in turn, are grouped according to four major types of speech act classes: assertives (speaker states what is believed or known); directives (speaker directs someone else to do something); commissives (speaker commits him or herself to some future action); and expressives (speaker expresses feelings or attitudes). The classification of speech acts is based on the categories proposed by Bach & Harnish, Searle, and Vanderveken. The conversational acts pertinent for this study are listed below.

**Primary Acts**

*Assertives*

- Accept: agrees to a <request>, <suggest>, etc.
- Agree: signals agreement with what was just said.
- Answer: responds to a <question>, <request>.
- Closer: ends a conversational closing.
- Confirm: responds to a request for confirmation.
- Inform: provides information.
- Reject: disagrees to a <request>, <suggest>, etc.
- Suggest: puts forward an idea or a plan.

*Commissives*

- Offer: presents something for acceptance/rejection.
- Promise: commits to a future action (Category Added).

### *Directives*

Check: asks for clarification.

Invite: asks if somebody 'would like to do X'.

Question: asks for information, confirmation, clarification.

Request: asks somebody to do something.

### *Expressives*

Apology: expresses regret.

Evaluate: judges the value of what the previous speaker said.

Farewell: bids farewell using a verbal formula (Category Added).

Greeting: greets somebody, usually with a verbal formula (Category Adapted).

Opine: gives one's personal opinion.

React: expresses attitude and strong feelings.

Thanks: expresses gratitude.

## Secondary Acts

Emphasizer: underlines what was said in the primary act.

Expand: gives complementary information.

Meta-comment: comments on current talk.

## Complementary Acts

Filler: fills a gap in the discourse.

Hedge: helps avoiding commitment.

Link: connects sentences using conjunctions.

Staller: plays for time.

Starter: helps getting started.

Other aspects of conversational discourse are described using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Grammatical problems associated with the formulation of communicative acts are explained in terms of sentence constituents, word classes, lexico-semantic confusion and cross-linguistic transfer for English. The realization of particular communicative acts is characterized with respect to grammatical structures, verbal formulas and implied meaning relationships. The presence of deictic indicators for person, space and time are detailed along with the number of co-referential links which serve to promote textual connectivity.

## 5. CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE ACROSS SPANISH PROFICIENCY LEVELS

Results of the conversational discourse produced at each proficiency level are discussed in the sections that follow. For each level, an example of a typical conversational text is shown. Each conversational act is categorized according to



speaker turn (R=Roberto; C= Consuelo), communicative type of act, interactional type of act and speech act class. Textual cohesion and co-referential connectivity are addressed along with the grammatical problems which affect the realization of conversation acts.

### 5.1. CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE AT THE BASIC SPANISH LEVEL

The conversational discourse produced by L2 Spanish learners at the Basic Spanish level has a number of distinguishing features. An example of a conversational text for this level is presented in Table 1. The communicative acts are listed sequentially without any grammatical or orthographic modifications.

TABLE 1. EXAMPLE OF CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE  
AT THE BASIC LEVEL (TEXT A-10)

SPEAKER TURN	CONVERSATIONAL ACT	ACT NUMBER	ACT TYPE	INTERACTIONAL CATEGORY	SPEECH ACT CLASS
R	Hola, Consuelo. ¿Cómo estás?				
C	Hola Roberto.	1	Greeting	Primary	Expressive
	Está bien.	2	Question	Primary	Directive
	Qué es tu planes para el noche?	3	Question	Primary	Directive
R	No tengo planes definido.	4	Answer	Primary	Assertive
C	Quieres voy a la película.	5	Invite	Primary	Directive
R	Qué es el filma.	6	Question	Primary	Directive
C	Es un filma con tres hermanas y uno hermana enferma.	7	Answer	Primary	Assertive
R	No porque muy triste.	8	React	Primary	Expressive
C	Quieres voy a un restaurante.	9	Invite	Primary	Directive
R	Sí.	10	Accept	Primary	Assertive
	Gracias.	11	Thanks	Primary	Expressive
C	Voy a la restaurante a las ocho.	12	Offer	Primary	Commissive
R	Sí.	13	Accept	Primary	Assertive
	Gracias.	14	Thanks	Primary	Expressive

The number of conversational acts (Mean=14.4, range 12-16) formulated by the group approximates the 12-items expected in the structured conversation task. All of the acts produced fall within the “primary” category which serve to move the essential verbal action of the conversation forward. No accompanying

“secondary” or “complementary” acts are used in any text. Overall, 13 different acts are produced at the level (Mean=9.2, range 8-11). A discourse profile of communicative acts performed by the group is presented below. The primary acts are organized according to four major speech act classes with the number of participants in the group who perform each subclass:

Assertives: Accept (5), Answer (5), Inform (4), Agree (2), Reject (1).

Commissives: Offer (2).

Directives: Invite (5), Question (5).

Expressives: React (5), Farewell (3), Thanks (3), Greeting (2), Opine (1).

The total number of assertive acts (5) is similar to the total figure for expressive acts (5), followed by directives (2) and commissives (1). It appears that the Basic Spanish group engages expressively in the conversation to the same degree as it does in asserting information.

Five of the pragmatically linked adjacency pairs (greeting <>greeting, question<>answer, inform<>react, invite<>accept, offer<>accept) are realized with numerous grammatical difficulties. These include problems with noun phrase constituents (adjectives: *definido* >*definidos*, *mucho*>*mucha*, *tu*>*tus*; determiners: *a la* >*al*, *el*>*la*, *una*>*unos*); verb morphology (*es*>*son*, *está*>*estás*, *estará*>*és*, *tenía*>*tengo*); addition or omission of grammatical forms (articles: *la*, *los*; nouns: *ver*; prepositions: *a*, *de*; verbs: *es*, *estoy*, *quieres*); lexico-semantic confusion (*conocer*>*saber*, *cuál*>*qué*, *ser*>*estar*); lexical approximations (*filma*>*película*, *resturante*>*restaurante*, *suspensas*> *de suspense*); and English cross-linguistic transfer (*Me no hay una definito planes*, *Ninfá's a las seis?*). The grammatical accuracy for the group approaches the 60 percent level (Mean=57.7%, range 35.7% to 83.4%) with respect to standard Spanish norms of usage.

In terms of the realization of specific communicative acts, invitations are extended primarily with polarity question forms (*Quieres ir a [...]*, *Vamos al cine, no?*); identification questions are initiated with interrogative pronouns (*dónde*, *qué*, *a dónde*); and informatives are structured using (S)subject-(V)verb-(S)complement order (*La película es una cómica con [...]*, *Bed of Roses estará romántica.*) or V-S-C sequence (*Es un filma con tres [...]*, [*Es*] *una película con mucho muerte*). The verb is omitted in two of the cases involving sentences with the V-S-C sequence. Verbal formulas appear in greetings (*Muy bien, gracias. Y tú?*, *Bien y tú?*) and farewells (*adiós*). Making an “offer” appears to place greater demands on conversational implicature since the acts are formulated using various grammatical forms: question (*Ninfá's a las seis?*); command (*Vienes a mi casa [...]*, *Llega mi a las ocho a mi casa*, *Ahora vamos a comer*); and a commitment (*Voy [iré] a la restaurante a las ocho*). The lexical indicator for politeness (*gracias*) and the intensifier (*mu*) plus adjective (*bien*, *suspense*, *triste*) are used by three of the participants.

As for grammatical concerns associated with textuality, deictic forms for person are represented through verb morphology (*yo*: *conozco*, *tengo*, *voy*; *nosotros*: *vamos*; *tú*: *llega[s]*, *quieres*, *vayas*) and the personal pronouns *yo* and *tú*. Other pronominal forms include the possessive *tus* and the prepositional object pronoun





*conmigo*. Referential continuity is maintained across the conversation with a lexical chain for *película* over three acts, relying on word repetition among three participants and lexical substitution (*filma, cine*) in two other cases. A lexical tie for *restaurante* is established across two acts by two subjects and one participant links *comer* over three acts.

## 5.2. CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE AT THE INTERMEDIATE SPANISH LEVEL

The conversational discourse produced by learners at the Intermediate Spanish Level has various distinctive characteristics. An example of a conversational text for this level is shown in Table 2. The text is presented following the same format used above in Table 1.

The number of acts produced at this level reflects an increased range of communicative functions (Mean=17.2, range 15-19). While most of the acts are in the “primary” category, there are three uses of “secondary” acts (expand) and one example of a “complementary” act (link). The group incorporates 17 different types of acts (Mean=11.0, range 9-12) which are characterized in terms of the following conversational profile based on speech act classes and the number of individuals performing each act.

### Primary Acts

Assertives: Accept (5), Answer (5), Inform (5), Agree (2).

Commissives: Offer (4), Promise (2).

Directives: Invite (5), Question (5), Request (2).

Expressives: React (5), Farewell (4), Opine (3), Greeting (2), Thanks (2), Evaluate (1).

### Secondary Acts

Expand (3).

### Complementary Act

Link (1).

The production of different types of assertives (4) and expressives (4) is similar, but there is an increase use of directives (3) and commissives (2) compared to the previous level. At the same time, the conversational texts begin to incorporate both secondary and complementary acts, which reflect an awareness of interactional discourse features.

TABLE 2. EXAMPLE OF CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE  
AT THE INTERMEDIATE LEVEL (TEXT B-6)

SPEAKER TURN	CONVERSATIONAL ACT	ACT NUMBER	ACT TYPE	INTERACTIONAL CATEGORY	SPEECH ACT CLASS
R	Hola, Consuelo. ¿Cómo estás?				
C	Bien.	1	Answer	Primary	Assertive
	¿Y tú?	2	Question	Primary	Directive
	¿Haces planes para esta noche?	3	Question	Primary	Directive
R	No sé.	4	Answer	Primary	Assertive
	Yo no soy seguro.	5	Inform	Primary	Assertive
C	¿Quieres ir al cine?	6	Invite	Primary	Directive
R	¿Cuál película quieres ver?	7	Question	Primary	Directive
C	Es una historia de amor.	8	Answer	Primary	Assertive
R	No.	9	React	Primary	Expressive
	No me gusta esas películas.	10	Inform	Primary	Assertive
	Me hacen triste.	11	Expand	Secondary	Assertive
C	Además (Entonces)	12	Link	Complementary	Discourse
	podemos ver una película de horror.	13	Suggest	Primary	Assertive
R	Es mejor.	14	Evaluate	Primary	Expressive
	Iré con tu.	15	Promise	Primary	Commissive
C	Te veo a las seis este noche a mi casa.	16	Offer	Primary	Commissive
R	Si.	17	Accept	Primary	Assertive
	Veo (te veré) allí este noche.	18	Promise	Primary	Commissive
	Adiós.	19	Farewell	Primary	Expressive

An accuracy rate of nearly 70 percent (Mean=69.98%, range 47.1% to 86.67%) reflects an improvement over the previous level. Grammatical problems involve noun phrase constituents (adjectives: *bueno>buena, gusto>gusta, mucho>mucha*; determiners: *este>esta, su>tus, una>un*); and verb morphology (*dígame>dime, hago>haces, vamos>iremos*); prepositions (*a>en, con tu>contigo*); lexico-semantic confusion (*cuál>qué, estar>ser, qué>cómo, mirar>ver, además>entonces*); and English cross-linguistic transfer (*con tu>contigo, Me hace triste, Es posible que tu vayas a mi casa*).

Communicative acts involving interrogative forms are realized through polarity questions (*¿Quieres ir al cine? ¿Te gustan las películas románticas?*) and information questions initiated with interrogative pronouns (*cuál, qué*). Informatives follow either a S-V-C or V-S-C order, with three cases using the first pattern and

the other two the second sequence. Various verbal formulas are used in farewells (*Adiós, Hasta luego, Hasta pronto*). Some acts are formulated using indirect means. An “offer” is stated as an informative (*Nosotros vamos a mirar Sense & Sensibility*) which is acknowledged with the corresponding “accept” (*sí*). In another case, a “suggestion” (*Además [entonces] podemos ver una película de horror*) elicits an expected “agree” response (*Es mayor*), indicating an awareness of conversational implicature. The politeness marker *gracias* appears in two texts, and the intensifier *muy* is used in one instance.

Various grammatical forms are used to indicate person deixis. These include verb morphology (yo: *puedo, tengo, veo*; tú: *haces, quieres, vayas*; ella: [*película empieza*]; nosotros: *podemos, vamos*); pronouns (subject pronouns: *yo, tú, nosotros*; object pronouns: *me, nos, te*); and adjectives (demonstratives: *este, [esta], esa, esas*; possessives: *mi, tu[s]*). The spatial deictic marker *allí* is used in one case. Referential continuity is extended over the conversation for *película* by all the participants, across three acts by two participants, four acts in two other instances and five acts in one case. Two of the participants substitute *cine* for *película* in their lexical chains. Lexical co-referential chains are maintained across two acts for *viernes, noche, teatro* and *mirar*, each referent by one participant respectively.

### 5.3. CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE AT THE ADVANCED SPANISH LEVEL

Learners at the Advanced Spanish Level continue to expand their conversational abilities. This can be observed in the conversational text shown in Table 3. The number of acts increases slightly from the previous level (Mean=18.4, range 15-21). More importantly, 22 different types of acts are produced at this level (Mean=11.6, range 10-13) indicating a greater sense of interactional discourse strategies. The conversational profile that follows reveals the range of communicative acts, speech act classes, discourse categories and the number of individuals performing each act:

#### Primary Acts

- Assertives: Accept (5), Answer (5), Inform (1), Agree (1), Suggest (1).
- Commissives: Offer (4), Promise (1).
- Directives: Invite (5), Question (5), Request (1).
- Expressives: Farewell (5), React (4), Evaluate (3), Thanks (2), Greeting (1), Opine (1).

#### Secondary Acts

- Expand (2).

#### Complementary Acts

- Starter (2), Filler (1), Hedge (1), Link (1), Staller (1).

The number of different kinds of assertives (5) and expressives (6) represents a modest increase from the previous level, while the production of directives (3), commissives (2) and secondary acts (2) remains similar to the figures for the Intermediate Level. The range of complementary acts becomes more differentiated, involving five different types of discourse markers.

TABLE 3. EXAMPLE OF CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE AT THE ADVANCED LEVEL (TEXT C-1)

SPEAKER TURN	CONVERSATIONAL ACT	ACT NUMBER	ACT TYPE	INTERACTIONAL CATEGORY	SPEECH ACT CLASS
R	Hola, Consuelo. ¿Cómo estás?				
C	Estoy muy bien.	1	Answer	Primary	Assertive
	¿Qué vas a hacer esta noche?	2	Question	Primary	Directive
R	No sé.	3	Answer	Primary	Assertive
	No tengo planes definidos o importantes.	4	Expand	Secondary	Assertive
C	Bueno,	5	Starter	Complementary	Discourse
	¿Quisieras ir a ver una película?	6	Invite	Primary	Directive
R	¿Cuál película?	7	Question	Primary	Directive
	¿Cuál es el nombre?	8	Question	Primary	Directive
C	¡Es una película que recibió buenos críticos!	9	Answer	Primary	Assertive
	Tiene mucha violencia.	10	Expand	Secondary	Assertive
R	No.	11	React	Primary	Expressive
	No me gusta las de violencia.	12	Inform	Primary	Assertive
C	Bueno,	13	Starter	Complementary	Discourse
	podemos mirar televisión.	14	Suggest	Primary	Assertive
R	Sí.	15	Accept	Primary	Assertive
	La quisiera mucho.	16	Expand	Secondary	Assertive
C	Vengas a mi casa a las cinco.	17	Request	Primary	Directive
R	OK.	18	Agree	Primary	Assertive
	Te veré a las cinco en tu casa.	19	Promise	Primary	Commissive
	Adiós.	20	Farewell	Primary	Expressive

The grammatical accuracy rate continues to improve (Mean=81.1%, range 73.5%-95.2%) at this level. Grammatical problems are associated with noun phrase constituents (adjectives: *mucho*>*mucha*, *planos*>*planes*; determiners: *este*>*esta*, *la*>*una*; omission of *las*, *unas* and addition of *a*, *los*); verb morphology (*murió*>*muere*,



*vengas>ven*); clitic pronouns (*la>lo*); lexico-semantic confusion (*estar>ser, mirar>ver*); prepositions (*en>a, en>por*); and English cross-linguistic transfer (*discotec>discoteca, eso escucha bien, ¿qué haces este noche?*).

All information questions are initiated with the interrogative pronoun *qué* or *cuál* in place for *qué* and invitations are opened with *quieres*. All informatives follow a V-S-C order. Impersonal grammatical forms (verb: *haber*; pronoun: *se*) are used in two informatives. Verbal formulas are used in both greetings (*estoy muy bien, muy bien y tú?*) and farewells (*adiós, hasta luego, hasta el lunes*). Various examples of hedges (*para ser sincero, pues la verda[d]*) and face saving devices (*si tú quieres, si no quieres*) appear in the conversations. Some directives are realized using the “we” verb form (*podemos, vamos*) as a mitigating device to soften the demand. In one case, an indirect means is used to make an “offer” (*El lunes en la tarde como a las 7 p.m. en mi apartamento*) and is followed by an “accept” indicating an understanding of the implied meaning. While there are four examples of the adverbial intensifier *muy*, no politeness markers appear in any text.

In terms of textual considerations, various grammatical means are used to indicate person deixis. These include verb conjugations (yo: *estoy, puedo, tengo*; tú: *quieres, piensas, vas*; ellas: *gustan*; nosotros: *vamos*); pronoun use (subject: *tú*, object: *la [lo], me, te*); adjectives (demonstratives: *esa, esas, esta, eso, esto*; possessives: *mi, tu*); and object of preposition (*conmigo*). The temporal deictic marker *hoy* is used in one case. Co-referential continuity is maintained for *película* across various acts by all participants, across four acts in three cases, three and five acts in two other instances, respectively. Two participants include the word *cine* or *teatro* in their respective lexical co-referential chains. Lexical co-referential links are also established for *casa* and *violencia* across two acts in one conversational text, while another text includes a link for *lunes* across four acts. Anaphoric reference can be observed across informative acts in at least three instances, two involving ellipsis (*Es una película, Tiene mucho violencia, Es una película de horror, Hay mucho sangre y mucho gente murió*); and one with cataphoric reference (*Se llama Drácula. Es película con mucho horror y miedo*).

#### 5.4. CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE AT THE SUPERIOR SPANISH LEVEL

The conversational abilities of Spanish learners at the Superior Level continue to develop. An example of a conversational text for this level is offered in Table 4. The number of acts increases substantially from the previous level (Mean=22.2, range 18-28). The group produces 25 different conversational acts (Mean=14.2, range 11-18), reflecting a greater range of conversational strategies. The following conversational profile illustrates the types of communicative acts, speech act classes, discourse categories and the number of participants performing the act:

##### Primary Acts

Assertives: Accept (5), Answer (5), Inform (5), Confirm (2), Suggest (2), Reject (1).  
Commissives: Offer (5), Promise (3).

Directives: Question (5), Invite (4), Check (1), Request (1).  
 Expressives: Farewell (4), React (4), Evaluate (2), Greeting (2), Opine (2), Thanks (2), Apology (1).

### Secondary Acts

Expand (5), Emphasizer (1).

### Complementary Acts

Starter (5), Hedge (2), Link (2), Staller (1).

The profile shows an increase in the number of assertives (6), directives (4) and expressives (7) compared to the Advanced Spanish group. There are also corresponding increases in the number of secondary and complementary acts. The comparable use of assertives and expressives indicates that these learners are able to engage at similar levels in transmitting information and interacting socially.

TABLE 4. EXAMPLE OF CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE  
 AT THE SUPERIOR LEVEL (TEXT D-9)

SPEAKER TURN	CONVERSATIONAL ACT	ACT NUMBER	ACT TYPE	INTERACTIONAL CATEGORY	SPEECH ACT CLASS
R	Hola, Consuelo. ¿Cómo estás?				
C	Bien,	1	Answer	Primary	Assertive
	gracias.	2	Thanks	Primary	Expressive
	¿Qué vas a hacer esta noche?	3	Question	Primary	Directive
R	No sé todavía.	4	Answer	Primary	Assertive
	Estaba pensando salir	5	Inform	Primary	Assertive
	pero	6	Link	Complementary	Discourse
	no sé.	7	Expand	Secondary	Assertive
C	¿Quieres ir al cine?	8	Question	Primary	Directive
R	¿A ver qué?	9	Check	Primary	Directive
C	Una película nueva que se llama <i>Bird Cage</i> .	10	Answer	Primary	Assertive
	Me dijeron que es bien cómica.	11	Inform	Primary	Assertive
R	No puedo porque ya hice planes con unos amigos.	12	Reject	Primary	Assertive
C	Bueno	13	Starter	Complementary	Discourse
	entonces	14	Staller	Complementary	Discourse
	yo puedo ir con ustedes.	15	Offer	Primary	Assertive



R	Sí, está bien.	16	Accept	Primary	Assertive
		17	Evaluate	Primary	Expressive
C	Ven a buscarme como a las ocho.	18	Request	Primary	Directive
R	Perfecto.	19	Accept	Primary	Assertive
	Te llamo antes de que vaya.	20	Promise	Primary	Commissive
	Te veo después.	21	Farewell	Primary	Expressive

The grammatical accuracy rate for this level approaches the performance ability of native speakers (Mean=95.5%, range 90%-100%). The few problems that exist are in the areas of noun-adjective agreement (*gráfico>gráfica*); prepositional use (*al>en, el; de>del*); and orthography in verb forms (*planiado>planeado, vasa>vas a hacer*).

Communicative acts which involve information questions are initiated by interrogative pronouns (*cuál, qué, quiénes, por qué*). Polarity questions are formulated by various means (*¿Tienes planes?, ¿Te gustaría ir a cine?, ya te la has visto?*). There is one case of a tag-like question (*¿A ver qué?*). Informatives tend to follow an S-V-C order (*Yo tengo que estar, Melanie Griffith me cae muy mal, [Yo] no sé todavía*) with a few structured as V-S-C (*también quería ver The Bird Cage, Comienza a las nueve, Hay una película que se llama [...]*). A number of informatives contain nominal subordination (*Yo tengo que estar en casa no más tarde de las diez, Me han dicho que esa película es aburridísima, Yo te llamo para decirte que estoy en camino*); and a few involve adjectival subordination (*Hay una película que se llama [...] que se dice es muy [...], Una película nueva que se llama Dead Man Walking*). Different verbal formulas are used in greetings (*¿Qué tal?, Hola Roberto, Muy bien, Bien gracias*); and farewells (*Chao, Hasta luego, Nos vemos, Te veo después, Te esperaré allá*). Similarly, various types of hedges (*Creo que, depende de qué película, estaba pensando salir, me dijeron, me han dicho que, pensándolo bien*) are employed as cautionary notes. Face-saving expressions (*¿qué tal te parece [...], ¿te gustaría más ver [...], si quieres ir [...]*) are incorporated to reduce potential threats to the interlocutor's public self image. Directive type acts include the "we" verb forms (*nos podemos encontrar, podemos ir, por qué no vamos*) as verbal strategies to moderate demands. An informative (*No me gusta toda esa sangre y violencia*) involves an understanding of implied meaning or conversational implicature since the statement refers to a dislike of "bloody and violent" movies. A few responses rely on figurative language (*¿Qué pinta!, Me muero de ganas*); and formulaic terms (*Perfecto, Lo siento*). Lexical (*muy*) and morphological markers (*aburridísima, chistosísima*) are used as intensifiers, and the politeness indicator *gracias* appears in two cases.

Textual connectivity and reference are developed through various linguistic devices. Person deixis is indicated with verb morphology (*yo: creo, llevo, quiero, puedo, veo; tú: haces, tienes, vas a hacer; ella: cae, comienza; nosotros: encontramos, podemos, vamos, vemos; ellos: dijeron, son*); pronoun usage (subject: *yo, tú*; object: *la,*

*lo, me, nos, te*); adjectives (demonstratives: *esta, esa*; possessive: *mi*); and object of preposition (*conmigo*). One example of a spatial marker (*allá*) and three temporal deictic forms (*ahora, todavía, ya*) appears in the conversations. Co-referential chains are developed for *película* across various acts, ranging from two to ten acts. Some chains incorporate lexical substitution (*cine*); pronoun forms (*la, otra*) or reference to a specific movie title. Other lexical chains are developed for *actores, casa, frente, planes* and *ver* in different texts. Anaphoric reference exists across various informative type acts, involving ellipsis in two cases (*Yo quiero ver Speed. [La película] comienza a las nueve, Una película nueva que se llama Bird Cage, Me dijeron que [la película] es bien cómica*) and lexical substitution in two other instances (*bar > Bayou, en frente de [el] cinema > allá*).

## 5.5. CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE AT THE NATIVE SPANISH SPEAKER LEVEL

The performance of native Spanish speakers on this discourse task provides important normative insights about the development of conversational abilities in L2 Spanish. An example of a conversational text for this level is shown in Table 5. The number of acts produced by this group is higher (Mean=25.0, range 22-30) than the figure for the Superior Level. However, the production of different types of acts (Mean=14.2, range 12-16) is comparable to the Superior Level (Mean=14.2, range 11-18), suggesting that L2 conversational abilities can approach native-like performance. The following conversational profile illustrates the range of communicative acts in terms of speech act classes, discourse categories and the number of participants performing each act:

### Primary Acts

Assertives: Accept (5), Answer (5), Inform (5), Reject (3), Closer (2), Confirm (1), Suggest (1).

Commissives: Offer (5), Promise (2).

Directives: Invite (5), Question (5), Check (2), Request (1).

Expressives: Farewell (5), Opine (4), React (2), Thanks (2), Evaluate (1), Greeting (1).

### Secondary Acts

Expand (4), Meta-comment (1).

### Complementary

Starter (5), Hedge (5), Filler (1).

The profile indicates that a comparable number of assertives (7) and expressives (6) are employed to move the conversation forward. This native speaker





group engages psychologically through expressives to nearly the same degree as it does in the transactional uses of language by way of assertives. At the same time, the production of directives, secondary and complementary acts does not differ from the performance at the Superior Level.

TABLE 5. EXAMPLE OF CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE  
AT THE NATIVE SPEAKER LEVEL (TEXT E-7)

SPEAKER TURN	CONVERSATIONAL ACT	ACT NUMBER	ACT TYPE	INTERACTIONAL CATEGORY	SPEECH ACT CLASS
R	Hola, Consuelo. ¿Cómo estás?				
C	Hola, Roberto.	1	Greeting	Primary	Expressive
	¿Cómo va todo?	2	Question	Primary	Directive
	¿Tienes algo planeado para esta noche?	3	Question	Primary	Directive
R	Pues	4	Starter	Complementary	Discourse
	creo que no.	5	Hedge	Complementary	Discourse
	En este momento no tengo nada.	6	Inform	Primary	Assertive
C	¿Qué te parece si vamos al cine?	7	Question	Primary	Directive
	Ponen una buena película en <i>El Florida</i> .	8	Inform	Primary	Assertive
R	¿Qué tipo de película es?	9	Question	Primary	Directive
C	Es una película francesa.	10	Answer	Primary	Assertive
	No recuerdo el título.	11	Inform	Primary	Assertive
	Es esa en plan intelectual.	12	Expand	Secondary	Assertive
R	Pues,	13	Starter	Complementary	Discourse
	la verdad es que	14	Hedge	Complementary	Discourse
	no me gustan demasiado las películas francesas.	15	Inform	Primary	Assertive
	Suelen ser muy aburridas.	16	Expand	Secondary	Assertive
C	¿Y si vamos al <i>Montero</i> ?	17	Offer	Primary	Commissive
	Ponen una película de Fellini.	18	Inform	Primary	Assertive
R	Ah,	19	React	Primary	Expressive
	eso es otra cosa.	20	Meta-comment	Complementary	Discourse
	Me parece bien.	21	Opine	Primary	Expressive
C	¿Qué te parece si quedamos a las 6 en la puerta del cine?	22	Offer	Primary	Commissive
R	Está bien.	23	Accept	Primary	Assertive
	Nos vemos allí a las 6.	24	Confirm	Primary	Assertive
	¿Vale?	25	Check	Primary	Directive
	Hasta luego.	26	Farewell	Primary	Expressive



The communicative acts which involve information questions are initiated by various interrogative pronouns (*cómo, cuál, qué, por qué*). Polarity questions are introduced by verbs (*harás algo, quieres, tienes*) and indirect, face saving means (*¿Qué te parece?; ¿Quieres ir al cine?; ¿Te parece que si vamos?; entonces ¿y si vamos?*). Informatives follow both S-V-O (*La película es acerca [...], [Yo] no sé el nombre de la película, Yo invito, Esa obra de Woody Allen me parece muy bien*) and V-S-O orders (*Es una película acerca [...], Es una película francesa, Es una película de terror*). Some informatives involve adjectival subordination (*la nave espacial que envían a la luna, un niño que escapa de su casa*) and nominal subordination (*pues he oído por ahí que es muy cruda, en realidad no sé lo que voy a hacer, la verdad es que no me gustan demasiado las películas*). Subordination also occurs in several directives (*¿Por qué no vamos a la tertulia que van a tener[...], Si quieres nos podemos encontrar en la[...], [...] si vienes a mi casa preparamos la cena, Bueno entonces te parece bien si nos vemos a las 6:00 p.m.*). In one case an informative (*Hay una película muy buena*) appears to be used as an indirect formulation of an “offer”. All participants at this level employ face saving expressions (*¿Qué te parece si vamos [...], Si quieres nos encontramos [...], Te parece bien si [...]*) and hedges (*En realidad no sé [...], [...] he oído por ahí que es [...], pues creo que no [...], realmente no he pensado[...], todavía no tengo nada [...]*). A number of acts incorporate verbal formulas (*¿Cómo va todo?, ¿De acuerdo?, Lo siento, Me parece bien, Nada en particular*). The lexical intensifier *muy* is used with several adjectives (*aburridas, bien, bueno, crudo*) and the superlative form *buenísima* appears in one case along with two instances of the politeness marker *gracias*.

Textual connectivity is maintained through various means. Person deixis is indicated through verb morphology (yo: *he oído, invito, me alegro, prefiero, tengo*; tú: *piensas, quieres, tienes*; él: *es, escapa, va*; nosotros: *charlamos, podemos, quedamos, vamos*; ellos: *envían, ponen*); pronoun forms (subject: *yo, tú*; object: *la, lo, me, te*; indefinite: *algo*; neuter: *eso*); and adjectives (demonstratives: *este, esta, ese, esa*; possessives: *mi, su*). Deictic forms are used to indicate time (*entonces, hoy, todavía*) and space (*ahí, allí*). All of the participants develop co-referential chains for at least three referents.

The most extensive lexical chain is for *película*, ranging from three links to ten ties. In some cases, *película* is substituted by another word (*cine, film, teatro*); a pronoun form (*esa, eso, la, lo*); and ellipsis. Other lexical chains involve the repetition of nouns (*casa, helado, Josefina, noche, supermercado*); prepositional phrases (*después/hasta/como a las seis, a las seis, a eso de las 5/a las 5 entonces*); and participles (*planeado/ [...], nada [planeado]*). Anaphoric reference is particular evident when viewed in terms of adjacency pairs: question<>answer (*¿Qué piensas hacer esta noche?>No pienso hacer nada en particular, ¿Qué piensas hacer esta noche?>Nada en particular. En realidad no sé lo que voy a hacer*); question<>question (*¿Por qué no vamos al cine?>¿Qué película quieres ir a ver?, ¿Quieres ir al cine?>¿A ver qué película? ¿De qué se trata?); and inform<>react (*Es una película francesa>No me gustan demasiado las películas francesas. Suelen ser muy aburridas, Hay una película muy buena>¿De qué se trata [la película]?); and offer<>accept (*¿Qué te parece si quedamos a las 6 en la puerta del cine?>Está bien. Nos vemos allí a las 6, Entonces nos podemos encontrar en el apartamento de Josefina>De acuerdo. Me alegro que Josefina también va).***

## 6. CONCLUSION

The development of conversational discourse in L2 Spanish tends to evolve incrementally across proficiency levels. The process involves the management of both transactional and interactive language functions within a sociocultural context. In this case, it entails the formulation of a broad range of conversational acts, use of hedges and mitigating devices, incorporation of discourse markers and responding appropriately to implied meaning. These learners of L2 Spanish use their L1 English conversational knowledge about turn-taking rules, adjacency pairs, formulation of speech acts, opening and closing strategies, topic management, deictic indicators and discourse markers. The lack of knowledge regarding the use of Spanish language forms is reflected in the production of conversational acts, particularly at the beginning levels. Cross-linguistic transfer patterns from English also appears in the formulation of various acts. A summary of the main quantitative findings is shown in Table 6.

The mean number of conversation acts increases progressively across the five language levels, from 14.4 at the Basic Level to 25.0 for the Native Speaker group. Similarly, there is an improvement of grammatical accuracy with increased language proficiency, ranging from 57.7% at the Basic Level to 95.5% by the Superior Level. The total production of different primary acts, classified under the five major speech act classes, reflects an increment trend from 12 acts at the Basic Level to 19 at the Superior and Native Speaker Levels. However, the production pattern for individual speech act classes does not show significant increases with proficiency levels, indicating that fundamental discourse knowledge is available from the Basic Level. The total production of secondary acts reveals an incremental pattern which starts at the Intermediate Level and becomes more extensive by the Superior Level. Secondary acts accompany primary acts by adding supplemental information. The production pattern for complementary acts also shows an incremental pattern beginning at the Advanced Level and continuing to the Native Speaker Level. Complementary acts involve the use of discourse markers which function as interactional signals. Thus, it appears that the formulation of conversation acts in L2 Spanish follows a developmental pattern which corresponds to the three principal types of acts: primary>secondary>complementary.

The number of deictic markers for person, space, time and discourse varies in the conversational texts due to limitations in language proficiency. Person deixis is designated by various means including subject and object pronoun forms, demonstrative and possessive adjectives and verb inflections. The number of person indicators tends to increase across the language levels. The use of spatial and temporal markers is highly restricted at the Basic, Intermediate and Advanced levels. Discourse markers, as noted above with the use of complementary acts, become widespread at the Advanced level and continue to increase across the Superior and Native Speaker levels.

The number of co-referential chains, which serve to maintain textual connectivity, increases with language proficiency. There is clear incremental pattern in the number of co-referential links developed at each language level, beginning with



TABLE 6. SUMMARY OF MAIN QUANTITATIVE FINDING  
AT THE SPANISH PROFICIENCY LEVEL

DISCOURSE ASPECT	BASIC LEVEL	LEVEL INTERMEDIATE	LEVEL ADVANCED	LEVEL SUPERIOR	SPEAKERS NATIVE
Mean number of acts	14.4	17.2	18.4	22.2	25.0
Percentage Accuracy	57.7%	69.9%	81.1%	95.5%	100%
Primary Acts*					
Assertives	5	4	5	6	7
Commissives	1	2	2	2	2
Directives	2	3	3	4	4
Expressives	5	6	6	7	6
TOTAL	13	15	16	19	19
Secondary Acts**					
Emphasizer	—	—	—	1	—
Expand	—	3	2	5	4
Meta-comment	—	—	—	—	1
TOTAL	—	3	2	6	5
Complementary Acts**					
Filler	—	—	1	—	1
Hedge	—	—	1	2	5
Link	—	1	1	1	—
Staller	—	—	1	1	—
Starter	—	—	2	5	5
TOTAL	—	1	6	9	11
TOTAL DIFFERENT ACTS	13	17	22	25	24

\* The figure represents the number of different subclasses produced at each level for the particular major speech act category.

\*\* The figure represents the number of participants at each level who produce the specific conversation act.

three at the Basic level, five at the Intermediate, seven at the Advanced, and eight at the Superior and Native Speaker levels.

To conclude, the conversational discourse produced by L2 Spanish learners in this study is greatly influenced by the proficiency level. Learners at each level can engage in collaborative language use, but the linguistic resources available affect the degree of meaningful participation.

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