Lexical complexity in oral and written Spanish: How complex is learners’ vocabulary?
Christina Mirisis

The present study examines lexical complexity in both oral and written L2 Spanish as well as the effect of the type of vocabulary, concrete or abstract, elicited by the task. Two elicitation tasks, a narrative and a picture description task, were used to collect samples of learners’ oral and written language. For the narrative task, learners created a story based on a series of four pictures designed to elicit concrete vocabulary. The picture description task, designed to elicit more abstract vocabulary, required the learners to describe a painting centered on abstract themes such as human rights. Lexical complexity in both the oral and written versions of the two tasks was measured using a type-token ratio (TTR), or the total number of different words divided by the total number of words in a segment of 54 words.

Learners’ lexical complexity in Spanish was very similar in the oral and written versions of the narrative task. However, their lexical complexity was greater in both the oral and written versions of the picture description task. While there was not much difference in learners’ complexity in the oral and written versions of the narrative task, there was more of a difference in the picture description task, indicating that lexical complexity is not always uniform across modes (spoken vs. written). Finally, the results also show us that lexical complexity does appear to be affected by the type of vocabulary elicited by the task, as it was greater with more abstract than concrete vocabulary.

L2 acquisition of Buenos Aires intonation: Evidence from a formal speech style
Phil Thornberry

Although L1 intonational phonology has witnessed a surge in popularity in recent years, such interest has not translated into a similar spike in L2 studies of Spanish intonation. This lack of research is especially surprising given the recent studies that indicate the importance of target-like intonation for L2 comprehensibility. This study provides an in-depth investigation of the L2 development of Buenos Aires Spanish intonation by 11 American university students studying abroad in Buenos Aires. All are intermediate learners of Spanish. This is a large-scale study that tracks the learners’ production of declarative and absolute interrogative utterances across one academic semester spent abroad. Though the current study employs varied elicitation tasks to approximate a number of speech styles, this presentation will focus only on the results found in the formal reading task.

Through an examination of pitch contours via the computer program Praat, the data indicate that the development of target-like production of Buenos Aires Spanish intonation is most notable in the absolute interrogatives. At the beginning of the semester, all 11 participants produced nearly categorical final rises in this sentence type. However, by the end of the semester, 2 participants shifted to a nearly categorical falling circumflex contour, which approximates quite closely the standard Buenos Aires Spanish absolute interrogative pattern. The falling contour was observed only sporadically in the speech of the other 9 participants. The speakers demonstrated less development of native-like norms for the declarative statements. It is hypothesized here that some of the learners approximated native-like interrogative patterns due to the saliency of the falling interrogative contour in Buenos Aires Spanish.