

# 5 An ethnographic approach to the study of linguistic varieties used by young Latin Americans in Barcelona

Víctor Corona<sup>1</sup>

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**Key concepts:** ethnography, interactional sociolinguistics, longitudinal studies, discussion groups, interviews, analysis of interaction.

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## 1. Introduction

This chapter explains part of a broader study. To be specific, it is based on the research I have been conducting in the city of Barcelona from 2005 through to the present day on what it means to *be Latino* in a youth- and school-based context. The work was essentially inspired by the ethnography of communication and the techniques inherent in it, such as participant observation and gathering different qualitative data.

In late 2005 and early 2006, I embarked on an ethnographic study in a neighborhood of Barcelona where a large number of immigrants from Latin America had settled. The murder of a Latin American boy in 2004 and other violent incidents involving young people of similar origin sparked a certain amount of social alarm which motivated government bodies such as Barcelona City Council to create programs specifically targeted at young Latin Americans. These programs relied on the collaboration of social workers, cultural mediators and sociologists who were experts in the – apparently – particular way of socializing of young Latin Americans. This was around 2008, and the suburban riots in some French cities were used, especially by the media, as one of the potential consequences of not addressing the issue of these young people.

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1. ICAR, Université Lyon 2, Lyon, France; victor.corona@ens-lyon.fr

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I started wondering about the production of *Latino-ness* and the consequences that this phenomenon might accrue in processes of social inequality within and outside of schools. There are different theoretical, methodological and even ideological ways of approaching Latino-ness. There is the possibility of assuming certain social categories, or putting them to the test through fieldwork. One might sustain the hegemonic discourse of the mass media and, to some extent, political and educational institutions, or try to refute and address them. All research entails a series of decisions that not only affect the way in which the subject matter of the research is restricted or limited but also the stance that will be taken to approach the phenomena that one wishes to investigate. Questions, decisions and perspectives crop up during the entire process, without necessarily being consistent with each other. This is the baggage of the researcher, which accompanies us during fieldwork, emerges surreptitiously in the questions we ask during interviews, inveigles itself in the way we note down our observations, edit a filmed recording, or encroaches on the decisions we constantly have to make with regard to what is relevant, or not, in relating what we wish to relate. This chapter deals with these questions, perspectives and decisions.

What were the objectives of my research?

The main objective of this research was to produce a thick description of the role of languages, of linguistic repertoires, in building the social identities of a particular group of young people in Barcelona. I focused on a group of Latin American youths who had already dropped out of school or were in the process of doing so. This general objective can be broken down into the following specific objectives:

- Describe the communicative practices and verbal rituals that different social participants categorize as Latino both in and outside the school.
- Investigate the different resources based upon which Latino-ness is built, paying particular attention to linguistic elements.

- Make a comparison between what dialectology manuals say about varieties of Spanish and the way certain Latin American youths talk in the context of the study.
- Study the importance of different discursive genres in conversation, such as hip-hop and reggaeton, in building Latino-ness.
- Analyze processes of inequalities at school involving young people who would classify themselves as Latinos.

It is worth mentioning that this study is based on an analysis of data in which boys of Latin American origin were the main participants. This is justified by the fact that Latino-ness is constructed as an eminently masculine identity. This emergence of Latino-ness in relation to the construction of masculinity in educational contexts is connected to other phenomena described by Willis (1977), Hewitt (1986), Tetreault (2008) and Fagyal (2010). During the fieldwork, I was able to gather a corpus of data involving Latin American girls, but for practical reasons I could not always include them in the parts of the study discussed in this chapter. This data made it evident, and this is a subject that could be pursued in subsequent studies, that girls may have other ways of participating in the Latino world.

## **2. Taking a stance: some notes on the methodology used**

Heller (2002) advocated that research is never neutral. The subjects of interest, the questions we ask ourselves, the research instruments and theoretical readings all relate to subjective interests, motivated to a large extent by our own backgrounds as individuals and our social position. According to Heller (2002), it is necessary to accept knowledge, including that produced by research, as subjective, partisan, socially situated and self-serving. My research is enshrined in this notion, as it is far from being neutral and objective. Nor does it aim to reach absolute conclusions and truths. It is an attempt to come up with a

response to certain phenomena that involve languages and identities, but most particularly involve people.

There is no doubt that the characteristics that each researcher brings along contribute to and resonate in the end product of a research project. As Heller (2002) said,

“[j]e crois qu’en bout de ligne, tout(e) chercheur(e) a explicitement ou implicitement une prise de position. Une bonne socialisation de nouveaux spécialistes doit donc en tenir compte. Je présenterai ici la mienne, non parce que je la trouve la meilleure que autres pour tout le monde, mais parce qu’elle fonctionne pour moi, et que je compte, en présentant mes propres démarches faciliter à mes lectrices et lecteurs la formulation de leur propre prise de position et les démarches qui en en découleront” (p. 22)<sup>2</sup>.

My research does not aspire to be interpreted as an absolute truth, but rather as a narrative that seeks to provide an answer, amongst other things, to the hegemonic discourse that surrounded (and continues to surround) young men of Latin American origin in the context of Barcelona.

### 3. Creating ethnography

The work I undertook was based on ethnography. At that time, I believed that the characteristics of this type of research could help me to understand the complexity of what was behind these discourses, and the role that different social participants played in them. Ethnography has proved to be an extremely useful tool not only in anthropological and sociological studies but also for research with sociolinguistic interests, as in this case. Sociolinguistic-type ethnographies share the general characteristic of constant reflection about not only the data

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2. “I believe that, ultimately, every researcher has to take a stance, whether explicitly or implicitly. A good socialization of new specialists should therefore take this into account. I will present my position here, not because I find it better than anyone else’s, but because it works for me, and that I believe, that by presenting my own procedures, I can facilitate the formulation of a positioning and of the procedures that derive from it by my readers” (Heller, 2002, p. 22).

per se but also the actual process of analysis and reflection. It emphasizes the importance of the questions asked, the role of the researcher, their ideas, their motivations and how, as a whole, all of this represents taking a stance with regard to the topic of interest. This reflection on the methodology is what defines ethnographical research as critical, as it aims to be reflexive not only in terms of the subject of interest but also the mechanisms of interpretation themselves.

### 4. Sociolinguistic ethnography

Authors such as [Heller \(2002\)](#) and [Coupland \(2007\)](#) mention that analyses in sociolinguistic ethnography do not focus on language itself but on language as a social practice. This means that the attention given to data is not based solely on linguistic forms or structures, as might be the case in a more conventional linguistic study, but on the role that these practices take on in interactions, depending on the social participants involved in them.

One of the objectives of sociolinguistic ethnography is to associate the description and analysis of social practices and processes. According to [Heller \(2002\)](#), the interpretation we make of the analysis of ethnographic data should consider the social dynamics that happen on a broader scale, in terms of both space and time. For example, some of the youths who appear in this work mention the ‘deterioration’ that their varieties of Spanish have experienced since migrating to Barcelona. In other words, the way they used to speak in Guayaquil was regarded as ‘educated’, but on arriving here, and coming into contact with other linguistic forms, they believe it has become ‘inferior’.

In this analysis, as noted by [Blommaert \(2010\)](#), we can identify how a process as universal as migration can also impact on the values of everyday linguistic practices. According to this author, this example would reflect how these migratory phenomena inherently involve certain movements (from the center to the outskirts) in which the speakers are transferred from one social sphere to another, not because of the ‘linguistic quality’ of their varieties but because of the social role they have in a particular context. In this case, it may be that

the specific form of Spanish that in Guayaquil is regarded as ‘educated’, in the Ecuadorian context, is viewed differently when they come to Barcelona in relation to the identity of its users, who might be perceived as immigrants of a lower social class.

Sociolinguistic ethnography thus attempts to discover how these kinds of social differences and inequalities come about, and their correspondence with the differences and hierarchies of linguistic forms. Authors such as Heller (1999, 2003), Heller and Martin-Jones (2001), Rampton (1995, 2006), Pujolar (1997, 2000), Mart́n-Rojo (2010) and Unamuno (1999, 2003) have insisted, through their respective studies, that this perspective of critical sociolinguistics can also help us to understand the workings of social institutions in the construction of categories deriving from the production and reproduction of these social inequalities. Another of the aspects worth highlighting of ethnographic sociolinguistic research is its concern for the impact that this can have in the community in which it occurs. In the field of education, with research that takes place at the heart of the school’s community, changes can arise in the dynamics of the social participants and this is considered part of the process, sparking further reflection. These are unlikely to be major changes or involve the whole educational center, but they *are* small changes in certain attitudes or perceptions in relation to the language uses, identities and situations of inequality that might be generated.

In the case of the research presented in this chapter, to give an example, based on the work carried out in schools, some teachers evinced a change of attitude towards the different linguistic varieties of Spanish, and even towards hybrid linguistic practices, normally evaluated as deficient practices. Heller (2002) notes with regard to this point:

“[t]oute recherche en sciences sociales est une forme d’action sociale, sous la forme sṕcifique de la construction du savoir. La sociolinguistique est particulírement bien placée pour reconnaître cette caractéristique, puisque la construction sociale du savoir passe par la communication et l’interaction, qui forment l’objet de base de la

recherche sociolinguistique. Cette action sociale, cette construction du savoir, est traversée par la nécessité d'un certain degré de réflexibilité, c'est-à-dire par le besoin de devenir conscient de la façon dont l'action de la recherche est reliée au savoir qu'elle construit et de rendre ce processus explicite, tout en tenant compte de ses conséquences sociales. Je cherche à explorer les possibilités d'une sociolinguistique que je qualifierais d'engagée, de critique, de réflexive, et surtout de voir comment une telle chose pourrait être réalisée concrètement" (p. 22)<sup>3</sup>.

To sum up, one could say that sociolinguistics with an ethnographic perspective is a discipline that postulates the need for constant engagement in methodological consideration, and which understands that the data obtained from social interaction and the categories used by the researcher are never neutral (Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001; Rampton, 2006). Indeed, some say that discussions and reflections on data in sociolinguistics is one of the elements that have made the most useful contribution to improving this research practice in the discipline (Pérez-Milans, 2011).

Another fundamental contribution to this work was the so-called ethnomethodological approach (Atkinson, 1988; Coulon, 1998; Garfinkel, 1967; see the chapters by Nussbaum, this volume and Masats, this volume), especially its consideration that social research demands that the researcher is also included in the analysis. In other words, giving an account of the social reality calls for showing the role that the researchers play in gathering and subsequently analyzing information from interviews, discussion groups, lesson recordings, spontaneous conversations, etc. (Mondada, 1999). This principle, which is also taken up in interactional sociolinguistics (Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001; Rampton, 1995, 2006), allows the researcher to be considered as a participant and includes him or her. In the research process, reflections

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3. "All research in social sciences is a form of social action, in the specific form of the construction of knowledge. Sociolinguistics is particularly well placed to recognize this characteristic, since the social construction of knowledge entails communication and interaction, which form the basic purpose of sociolinguistic research. This social action, this construction of knowledge, is riven by the need for a certain degree of 'reflexibility'; in other words, by the need to become aware of the way in which the action of research is connected to the knowledge it builds and renders this process explicit, taking into account its social consequences. I try to explore the possibilities of a sociolinguistic approach that I would describe as engaged, critical and reflexive and, above all, to see how such a concept could be realized specifically" (Heller, 2002, p. 22).

are embedded about the figure of the researcher and their role as an agent who, along with the other participants, is involved in building the social reality under study.

## **5. The study: the linguistic varieties of young Latin Americans in Barcelona**

The data making up the corpus of the research described in this chapter were gathered during a long process of ethnographic work from 2005 to 2009. It was mainly conducted at a secondary education school (and the surrounding area) in the northern part of the city of Barcelona. The participants in this project were not selected following the usual guidelines. During the participant-observation process, some of the youngsters expressed a wish to get involved in the research, and following the natural dynamics of socialization, one participant called another one and so on and so forth until the corpus of data that I collated was constituted.

The total corpus consists of 21 interviews, 12 discussion groups and four hours of different classes, all recorded on audio or video. It also contains documents written by the students and other texts, such as songs written by the students or notes in the fieldwork diary. The corpus covered different spaces outside of the school, including parks, bars and squares, and also included the voices of mothers, fathers and teachers.

### **5.1. Type and collection of data**

Essentially, the collected data were classified as follows:

- Audio recordings of interviews and discussion groups.
- Audio and video recordings of language lessons in the classroom.
- Video recordings of interactional spaces in schools.



- Collection of music, pieces of writing and other documents.
- Notes in the fieldwork diary.

The corpus of this research was composed by dozens of people who, through interviews, discussion groups and conversations in and outside the classroom, expressed their ideas, explained their stances as opposed to other people's, introduced themselves to other people, etc. The complexity of making all these different discourses manageable to be studied as a whole, thus creating a giant network of interwoven voices leading to the creation of different realities, is patently obvious.

## **5.2. Processing and analysis**

The data was transcribed with different programs: primarily, I used Transana, while I also used ELAN for shorter fragments that I wanted to analyze in depth (see the chapters by [Antoniadou, this volume](#), and [Moore & Llompart, this volume](#)). Most of the interviews and discussion groups were transcribed in full. The classroom data, especially the video recordings, were only transcribed partially.

To analyze the data I considered different contributions on interactional sociolinguistics ([Blommaert, 1995](#); [Gumperz, 1976](#); [Pujolar, 2000](#); [Rampton, 1995](#)). In this respect, the data processing tried to address the contributions of the ethnomethodology tradition and the work of conversational analysts (see [Masats, this volume](#); [Nussbaum, this volume](#)).

## **6. An example of interactional analysis: the discovery of Latino speech**

This section shows an example of an analysis to give an idea of how I processed the corpus of data gathered in the study. The Latino way of speaking emerged as a kind of hybrid variety that is difficult to recognize as inherent to a specific

dialectal zone. It is a mixture that moves within a linguistic repertoire formed by the sociolinguistic scenario in which these young people live. Obviously local varieties, including Catalan and peninsular Castilian, which might be considered dominant in various different and complex senses, form part of this repertoire on which the Latino variety is structured.

To clarify what I have just said above, I believe it is worth taking a look at some of the recorded data. This is an excerpt that forms part of the data gathered during the first period of the ethnographic study (2006), featuring a conversation between a group of six teenagers in their first year of secondary education (i.e. a discussion group; see [Canals, this volume](#)). The boys were of various different origins: three of them were Ecuadorians from Guayaquil (Ignacio, Raúl and Pedro), one was from a village near Quito (Néstor), one was Bolivian (Oscar) and one a Peruvian boy from Chiclayo (Alex). It is obvious from the numbers of the utterances in this excerpt that this has been extracted from a much longer conversation. The transcript symbols used (see [Moore & Llompart, this volume](#)) can be found in the Appendix.

### Fragment 1

377.	INV.	de:e así de:el_ pues de:el-  bueno lo que ustedes llaman racismo_ o diferencia [+diferencia+] de trato\
378.	IGN.	yo sé que aquí en cuarto\  hay de una:a\  una de ra_ una chica de_
379.	PDR:	de segundo_ el jaimé <i>tío</i> \
380.	OSC:	XXXX
381.	PDR:	va diciendo [+disiando+] indio de mierda\
382.	VCR:	cómo\
383.	PDR:	que le pegaron\  ayer-
384.	VCR:	qué pasó\
385.	ALX:	al jaimé_ qué jaimé\
386.	PDR:	al gordo_ <i>tío</i> u:un_
387.	ALX:	al que_ un bajo\
388.	PDR:	no\  el que tiene aquí morado\  al que le pegó el agustín-
389.	VCR:	por qué\
390.	ALX:	porque va diciendo [+disiando+] negro de mierda a todo el mundo_ <i>tío</i> \  y al final lo callas así\  (F) pua_ le metes un <i>quiño</i> y le dejas el ojo morado_ así\

391.	PDR:	el agustín le estaba dando puñetes así_ le dieron un puñete_
392.	RAL:	qué pone aquí/
393.	PDR:	y:y-  <i>le denunciaron</i> [+denunsiaron+]_ <i>tío</i> \
<i>Peninsular Castilian variety</i>		
<i>Latino variety</i>		
<b>Corpus 2006-2007 Support group</b>		
<b>Participants: Víctor, Pedro, Raúl, Oscar, Alex, Ignacio</b>		

This short excerpt can be used to talk about hybridization and also problematize it. It also serves to demonstrate that interpreting interactional data means analyzing it utterance by utterance in a detailed way, not simply presenting or paraphrasing them (Antaki, Billig, Edwards, & Potter, 2003).

In utterance 377, the researcher puts forward the topic of racism, which is later reformulated as “different treatment”. Based on this, the boys band together to describe what they understand by racism. Ignacio, intending to answer the researcher’s question, refers to a girl but Pedro, in utterance 379, pushes in to put forward another story. Meanwhile, Alex talks about a boy who a Latin American friend of his had hit for “going round telling everyone he was an *indio de mierda* (shitty Indian)”.

**Green** is used to highlight the words or expressions assigned to varieties of American Spanish, and **red** to highlight those that can be identified as part of Peninsular Spanish; in other words, not typical of any of the American varieties of Spanish. The *seseo* trait<sup>4</sup> is highlighted in bold.

Thus an external observation of the excerpt shows us, for example, the use of the word “*tío*” (mate) as a colloquially-used epithet, a definition given by the Royal Spanish Academy, the Real Academia Española (RAE, 2002). The use of “*tío*” in this sense is very widespread in every social sphere in Spain and is not exclusive to young people or Spanish-speaking areas. Indeed, Pujolar (1997), in his study on the speech and identities of young people in Barcelona, mentioned the widespread use of this term among youth, regardless of the language they used on an everyday basis (Catalan, Spanish or both, in this

4. Pronunciation of the letter c and z as /s/ rather than /θ/, the latter being typical of some Peninsular varieties.

case). A look at the Latino variety, linked to local practices and identities, confirms that the use of “*tío*” is also part of this variety. This is the case regardless of the fact that the use of the expression “*tío*”, in the sense that the boys are using it here, does not form part of the lexicon of the different varieties of American Spanish of these youths. The only meaning of “*tío*” in Latin America is uncle, or aunt in the feminine version; i.e. the brother or sister of a parent (RAE, 2002).

Pedro and Alex used “*tío*” in their stories without this causing any kind of reaction that would have us infer that this word was unusual to the other participants. We do not witness any procedures that ‘foreignize’ it in the sense of Mondada (1999). Quite the contrary; the word was just one more in the conversation and occupied a key role in the construction of the story. It is an epithet that positions the conversation as one between young peers, denoting the activity as a clearly informal one.

But “*tío*” is not the only word that warrants a comment in this sense. For example, in turn 390, Alex uses the expression “*le metes un quiño*” (you smack him one), referring to the way in which someone reacted to an incident they considered racist. The word “*quiño*” appears in the RAE dictionary as a colloquial Ecuadorian expression that stems from the Quechuan word *k’iñay*, meaning to hit.

While one might suspect that Alex used the word “*quiñar*” as part of his variety of origin, this is not the case. Alex is not Ecuadorian, but Peruvian. While it is difficult to establish whether or not this word appears in one of the different varieties of Peruvian Spanish – which would not be surprising, given the geographical proximity and the Quechuan background to Castilian speech in Peru, what *is* interesting is the lack of a mechanical correspondence between the forms used in the story and the countries of origin of the boys. This lack of correspondence, I believe, gives the words “*tío*” and “*quiño*” an even more special value: they are used by Alex to construct a story in which the Latino voice is the protagonist, and in which *bricolage* is key to giving the story authenticity.

Turn 391 can also be interpreted in this sense, where Pedro introduces the phrase “*dar puñetes*”. If we continue to use the RAE as a reference, this expression is defined as ‘administering blows with a closed fist’. While it does not specify the origin, one might assume that it is not peninsular, as it does not appear in other dictionaries for this area, such as the *Diccionario de Uso del Español* by María Moliner (2007).

The compositional nature or *bricolage* I am commenting on not only affects the lexicon but also interesting aspects of syntax. In turn 393, Pedro concludes the incident by saying: “*le denunciaron tío*” (they reported him, mate), using a *leísta* form<sup>5</sup> which, according to the RAE, is characteristic of the dialects of the central Iberian Peninsula and considered to be vulgar in other areas. In Latin America the use of the indirect object pronoun with verbs such as *denunciar* (report) is not only uncommon but is considered to be a mistake and is systematically corrected. While there are studies that claim there are certain cases of *leísmo* in Latin America as a result of contact with aboriginal languages, this is not generalized.

In addition to this specific use of the pronoun “*le*” mentioned above, something I would particularly like to point out is that this is a use which, like the other traits I have highlighted, appeared in the conversation without causing any kind of reaction that might lead one to understand that it was something that the participants regarded as part of a non-local or unauthentic variety of the speakers. Quite the contrary; for these youths it did not seem to be an indication that would suggest that the way they speak is Latino or not. Rather, as I am trying to demonstrate, it was a variety that the others recognized as appropriate for the activity in which they were participating.

Among phonological aspects, two of them stood out in the data. Firstly, there was notable use of *seseo* which, at least in Barcelona, is a pronounced trait because it does not form part of the Spanish that is customarily heard in the city, nor is it used as a model in schools. Secondly, and related to this, I believe that certain uses of the phoneme [s] and its alternation with other phonemes in specific contexts

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5. Use of the indirect object pronoun *le* rather than the direct object pronoun *lo*.

also acquires a particular significance. For example, in the above excerpt all the speakers, including the researcher, used the *seseante* variety of Spanish.

Above and beyond the difference between the phonemes available in the language, the Latin American varieties are also characterized by the use of a set of allophones for the phoneme [s] that do not correspond to the ones used in Peninsular Spanish, and are different from the voiceless alveolar fricatives typical of northern Spain. In Latin America, the ‘s’ is extremely variable, and tends to be assimilated with other adjacent phonemes and even alternates with aspiration or with total elision in front of certain consonants. This ‘s’, which many people recognize as typically American, is not homogenous in dialects, although it is in contraposition to the ‘s’ of the northern Peninsula. According to my data, Latinos also present significant variability with regard to the use of the ‘s’. What does appear to be invariable, and this was expressed by the youths in their conversation, is the *seseo*.

The second phenomenon refers to prosody; in other words, the traits that concern the frequency, duration, intensity and rhythm of speech sounds. As noted by several authors (Hayward, 2000; Llisterri, 1991), prosody is polysemic and fulfills many functions in orality, and has an evident semantic-pragmatic value. But what is of interest here is that, according to linguists, it plays a fundamental role in assigning sociolinguistic values, such as geographical origin, social status, gender, etc.

## 7. Concluding words

In this chapter I have tried to show how the ethnographic approach can be of great use in appreciating how communities understand their identities and the role that languages play in this process. I have outlined the research questions and consequently the methodology chosen and the way data were processed.

In the interactional data I have provided as an example, we have also seen how certain sociolinguistic characteristics of some of the Latin American youths can be interpreted as a style or an emerging variety, associated with a specific

social identity: Latino. Traditional dialectology would be inadequate, as it is not possible to relate the variety used by these youths with a particular geographical origin. Rather, the excerpt reflects a polyphonic discourse which features traits that could be associated with varieties of Spanish from both continents. As a kind of *bricolage*, these resources are concatenated in a multiple variety which is identified by its users and by other people as Latino.

Ethnography, however, has certain limitations. Personally, one of the biggest difficulties I came across during my research was establishing a distance from the participants. Continual contact and work with the youths and the empathy this led to sometimes turned against me when trying to form a critical perspective of my observations. Another difficulty I experienced was the organization and classification of the corpus of data. The nature of my research resulted in a vast amount of data (see also [Unamuno & Patiño, this volume](#)). Sometimes, this compilation was not as systematic as it should have been, which caused problems when it came to relating the interviews and the fieldnotes with the research questions. In this respect, the chapters by [Antoniadou \(this volume\)](#), and [Moore and Llompart \(this volume\)](#) may be of assistance, in which they offer strategies for organizing ethnographic data.

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## Appendix

Adapted from GREIP transcription symbols (see [Moore & Llompart, this volume](#)):

Tonal sequences:

Descending \

Ascending /

Pauses:

Short |

Medium ||

Long <number of seconds>

Syllabic lengthening (according to duration): · · · · ·

Overlaps: =spokentextA= =spokentextB=

Interruptions: Text\_

Intensity:

Piano {(P) text}

Pianissimo {(PP) text}

Forte {(F) text}

Fortissimo {(FF) text}

Tone:

High {(A) text}

Low {(B) text}

Tempo:

Fast {(AC) text}

Slow {(DC)

Utterances accompanied by laughter: {( @) texto}

Comments: [comments]

Incomprehensible fragments (according to duration): XXX | XXX XXX | XXX  
XXX XXX

Uncertain fragment: {(?) text}

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**Enfocaments qualitativus per a la recerca en educació plurilingüe (Catalan)**  
**Enfoques cualitativos para la investigación en educación plurilingüe (Spanish)**

**Edited by Emilee Moore and Melinda Dooly**

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