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Elías Domínguez Barajas

THE FUNCTION OF PROVERBS IN DISCOURSE

THE CASE OF A MEXICAN TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL NETWORK

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The Function of Proverbs in Discourse: The Case of a Mexican Transnational Social Network

Contributions to the Sociology of Language

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by

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Para Ubaldo, Alicia, y los morritos escondidos entre la milpa

For Dell Hymes and John J. Gumperz,
whose vision inspired so many of us
to reveal the importance of contextualized
discursive practice

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Many years ago, while wandering through the aisles of a small public library, a book whose title I can no longer recall ended up in my hands. The book's general argument also escapes me now, but a scenario described therein stayed with me. Imagine, the author proposed, a prehistoric time, a pristine landscape, and a band of early humans, who can communicate with each other in a more than rudimentary way, moving purposely toward the mountainous range before them. The seasons are changing, and they must follow the migrating herds they hunt in order to survive. Their journey quickly leads them to the foot of mountain where they have to make a choice: should they cross over the snow-covered peak of the mountain, braving the elements and the craggy terrain, or should they take the far longer path around the mountain, braving the wild animals that prey in its deep forests? The author imagined that it was at a moment like this that leaders emerged; each would make the case for one or the other path, and it would be for the rest of their party to choose whom to follow. The author, if I recall correctly, proposed that this was the birth of rhetoric. With their lives in the balance, the stakes of the choice made couldn't be higher, and the leaders, in articulating the reasons for their position, probably each won adherents, which also created factions within the group. Carrying the scenario further, the author proposed that this was probably also how clans emerged, and eventually, with social and biological evolution, so did entire cultural groups.

I begin my own book with this anecdote because it encapsulates the importance of discourse in human lives. It is through our use of language that not only do we get things done collectively but also through it that we co-identify socially. It is not only what we say, but how we choose to say it, that influences those around us, and this basic observation generates ripples in the pond of discursive theory. The concentric circles widen as they move from the center, and we are led to the foundational tenet of the issues addressed in this book: discursive practices are socio-culturally defining because they mediate our perceptions of our situations, ourselves, and those around us. To study discourse, then, is to study how we humans negotiate meaning with each other, and, by extension, the underlying reasons for the breakdown of such a negotiation. For this reason, any contribution to the study of language use – what is generally understood by the phrase "the sociology of language" – in regard to any community stands to benefit us all; the discursive differences, just as the similarities, that we uncover when we examine

language use analytically and critically are not only contributions to our general compendium of knowledge but a potential key to ensuring social progress, equity, understanding, and justice in so far as we are willing to recognize that discourse is a tool with which we fashion and generally manipulate our social realities.

In a recent publication, the prolific discourse analyst Teun Van Dijk states that the central task of discourse and conversational analysis is "to examine the grammatical, stylistic, rhetorical, pragmatic, argumentative, interactional or other structures that define the various dimensions or levels of [. . .] speech" (2006: 160). He goes on to argue for the consideration of "the social, political, institutional or cultural conditions and consequences" as equally verifiable and significant dimension of linguistic analysis. Although Van Dijk is right to mention the problem of documenting the socially-defined environments that make up the "context" of speech, there is a compelling reason behind his interest in prompting us to consider these aspects of speech as documentable and therefore analyzable: to do so is to examine the dimensions of language that attest to the power differentials. The negotiation of power is a reality that every human being confronts, and does so primarily through the use of language.

The widening purview of discursive analysis attests to the integral role of language in everyday experience, and in this book, the study of a Mexican social network's use of a particular discursive expressive form, builds on the idea that every study of discursive practice informs our understanding of the nature of language and its role in informing – if not constituting – our lived experience and our perception of, and therefore relation to, others.

This awareness of the depths of discourse analysis made the study that follows somewhat daunting for me. Contrary to what might be expected, the fear was not rooted in confronting the magnitude of language as a phenomenon (although there was certainly some of that as I will reveal in the next few lines), but, instead, the fear was rooted in training the analytical lens on the community to which I'm so utterly attached, and claiming to be ready to dissect it. Indeed, of all the types of analysis that a person may engage in, perhaps the most rewarding – and daunting – is the type that involves a mirror, and the idea of examining, evaluating, and encapsulating ourselves is at once appealing and unnerving, for such tasks aim to reduce the magnitude of the object of study, unravel its complexity, and thus demystify it – something that we know to be hardly desirable, if indeed possible, about ourselves. In my case, the prospect of analyzing the use of proverbs as a discursive practice within a community of transnational[1] Mexican

1 *Transnationalism* is used here to indicate that these immigrants maintain active participation, ties, and alternating presence in their community of origin as well as in their host community.

immigrants I have known most of my life, and to which I refer here as the López social network,[2] appeared initially to be a simple matter of looking at a pattern made up of defined features and explaining their overall effect. That apparently straightforward task was immediately complicated just as much by the standing argument of the last 20 years against ethnographic accounts being essentially discursive exercises in the exoticizing (and commodifying) of the Other (Marvasti and Faircloth 2002; Van Maanen 1988: 22; Clifford and Marcus 1986), as it was by the somewhat prevailing notion that cultural introspection is suspect.

If the first challenge against ethnographic endeavors is that outsiders exploit those unlike them by studying them, the second challenge suggests that insiders are too immersed in their own cultural processes to be reliable critics of them.

The first argument presupposes that an outsider who comes into a foreign community and studies its ways will always end up presenting a reductive encapsulation of both the people and their ways in a textual version of a reality that attracts the general reading public with its promises of veracity, revelation, and a measure of escapism or authoritative knowledge of – and thus over – the Other. That argument brings to mind the arm-chair anthropologist who, despite the limitations of his information, needed only to get a report from sea-faring visitors to foreign lands to analyze the inhabitants' beliefs and make an argument about their civilization or lack thereof. The Other – the critics of the ethnographic effort argue – is exploited and diminished in as much as the ethnographer embellishes the cultural distance between groups in order to make the textual account more appealing to the reading public (Sperber 1982: 180).

As a researcher engaging in ethnographic introspection, I am obviously troubled by such suggestions, as the furthest thing from my goals is to engage in shameless exploitation that dishonors not only the scholarly effort but more importantly the people who in the following pages allow a glance into one of the means by which they maintain a degree of social cohesion in what was initially – and in some ways still is – a hostile and alienating host society for them. Additionally, to consider the outsider's perspective as somewhat more reliable than that of the insider seems intentionally perverse; especially when one considers that virtually every modern ethnographer has sought something akin to the "insider's perspective" in an effort to render a truly faithful understanding of the cultural practices under consideration. The *etic* perspective, we have learned, is never as effective as when it is complemented by the *emic*[3] one, and good

2 All the names of the social network members referred to in this work are pseudonyms, as is the name of their home village in Mexico.

3 The terms "etic" and "emic" were coined by Kenneth Pike (1967) to differentiate between different ways of considering linguistic data; derived from the linguistics terms "phonetic" and "phonemic," which distinguish between actual sounds and

ethnographers have shown us that those engaging in the practice should feel compelled to make inquiries and test hypotheses in consultation with natives in order to get "it" (i.e., meaning, and therefore understanding) right. To say, then, that native perspective should be transcended or held suspect for the sake of objectivity or unfettered analysis seems at odds with the very goal of ethnographic research.

It was this concern, in part, that helped to shape the following ethnographically-based analysis into what it is and brought about its marked stylistic deviation from its predecessors. While there are certainly some detailed descriptions of situations, events, and people that were involved in the collection of the data, the aim of this ethnographic account is neither to present an exhaustive account of the Mexican immigrant community on which it focuses, nor to claim that many of the community's defining traits and concerns will be addressed.

In fact, this account focuses exclusively on the functions of a particular discursive practice in this community in order to theorize how language, culture, and thought intersect. By limiting the range of the data considered, the analysis proves to be much more practical in so far as it has greater applicability. That is, the analysis of the data presented here is much more about what society in general loses when a particular social group's language or discursive practices are stifled or dismissed before the latter are examined in detail and evaluated without bias, than it is about how a particular Mexican social network lives or how it came to be.

The general aim of this book, then, is to show how complex even the most common discursive practices generally are, and to suggest that the recognition of such complexity argues against persistent attempts to devalue, ignore, or outright condemn the discursive practices of ethnolinguistic minorities in order to promote a "standard" or "educated" way of speaking that furthers a particular ideology in the United States and ultimately alienates many of those for whom the consequences of the discursive swap is too traumatic.

Growing up as a Mexican immigrant in Chicago, I personally experienced the conflict of discursive traditions that pitted my home language with that of the academy, and, as I made my way through school and daily public life, I

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meaning-bearing sounds, the term "etic" alludes to empirical properties that are amenable to direct observation and replication, whereas the term "emic" alludes to what is mentally recognizable as significant in sound production. For instance, a speaker of English may choose to make a clicking sound after a particular vowel sound, which may be rendered phonetically in transcription of that speech, but other speakers of English will not ascribe a particular meaning-influencing function to that clicking because it is not a phoneme – a linguistically significant sound – for them.

felt something akin to what New York literary and socio-cultural critic Norman Podhoretz calls "the brutal bargain" in his autobiography, *Making It*. The bargain, as Podhoretz characterizes it, involves upward social mobility on the condition that ethnic and working-class markers – and perhaps even social ties – are forsaken. During my youth, I felt that at almost every level of schooling I was forced to consider that the language I spoke at home (Spanish) was a hindrance that I needed to jettison and that my ethnicity was a source of shame and disempowerment because it marked me as an outsider.

It wasn't until adulthood that I realized how vile and destructive these attitudes were. My bilingualism was the opposite of a hindrance, but I did not learn this until college, where, for instance, my familiarity with Latinate vocabulary helped my literacy skills. Awareness of my ethnicity forced me to learn about the historical factors that have contributed to the disempowerment of Latinos and Blacks, as well as that of other ethnic minorities in the U.S. Thus, introspection has been for me not only a common practice but a requirement to confront the various forms of discrimination and cultural devaluation that my social network faced in the U.S. and which are, unfortunately, quite common social ills in the quotidian events that make up our lives in multi-ethnic societies.

Despite my opposition to the argument against introspection, when I consider how my native status can be expected to compromise my critical distance to my subject, I acknowledge that there is some legitimacy to the concern. I recognize the danger of not noticing the unusual in what to me is the stuff of the everyday (for example, that Mexican parents sometimes address their young children in the formal – rather than the common informal – second-person voice; or that younger members of the social network I studied sometimes quote proverbs to the older members; or that honor and respect are not necessarily premised on wealth, or occupation, or even age). But to consider that there is no corrective against insider blindness is tantamount to admitting that academic training is superseded by socialization – something that proved to be completely contradicted in my case, for, if nothing else, it was my academic training and driving curiosity that led me to question the "naturalness" of everything that characterized the behavior of the López social network, despite my involvement in it.

In fact, if there was a problem with introspection, it often seemed not to be a matter of sacrificing critical distance but of missing out on the joys of uncritical participation. Several times I found myself thinking that I needed to jot down the circumstances surrounding a proverb as soon as it was uttered, and analyzing the situation, instead of enjoying the moment. During those times I felt as if I were truly of two minds – that of the participant and that of the observer – each vying for control, and, alas, I also remember feeling genuinely resentful that the observer always seemed to ruin the moment for me.

The cultivation of a critical perspective oriented toward one's community despite being an "insider" is not as unusual as it may seem, if we dispense with the reification of the insider/outsider dichotomy as the foundational distinction in ethnographic endeavors. Kirin Narayan (1993: 672), for one, observes that such a dichotomy at the level of "culture" obfuscates how micro-level social distinctions "such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status." The micro-level social identifiers are certainly relevant in the consideration of meaning, as social context affects not only what is communicated but how that communication is interpreted. Not withstanding the myriad factors involved in the construction of context, or precisely because there is the potential for a multiplicity of factors influencing meaning, a researcher must be able to determine which factors are prominent enough to guide understanding and which are less so – or to put it another way, the task is to ascertain which signals and signifiers must be attended to and which may be deemed "background noise." The ability to discern what shared knowledge and which social factors are relevant is what may be termed cultural competence.

Nevertheless, Narayan's pertinent observation about what makes one an insider/outsider in cultural terms, brings up to question the very notion of culture (what is it that is shared or not?). The short answer is that there are many good definitions of culture, but not one on which there is consensus. Saeeda Shah (2004: 553–556) offers a brief list of notable sources presenting the various definitions of culture, ranging from Kroeber and Kluckhohn's (1952) compilation of 164 definitions at the time their book was published to Cheng's (2000: 209) definition of it as "a system of shared assumptions, beliefs, values, and behaviour in a given group, community, or nation." What is more, Shah gives her definition of the term in the following way:

> [C]ulture is some sort of "social glue" which holds people together and makes people perceive and define themselves (in spite of all other variations) as a cultural group in opposition to another cultural group or a perceived member of another group, and which determines their interactional codes and patterns of behaviour. (Shah 2004: 555)

Although I agree that culture may be understood as "the social glue" that ensures the integrity of a community, Shah's definition of culture in oppositional terms comes dangerously close to my working definition of "ethnicity" as a term indicating the subordinate status of a cultural group within an over-arching one. That is, ethnic groups may be defined by one or more social features (e.g., language, rituals, mores, phenotype, national origin) that may be linked to the

amorphous concept of culture, but the presence of those features alone does not necessarily lead to cultural exclusion from the over-arching group. It is the presence of distinguishing social features set in oppositional juxtaposition to those of the dominant socio-cultural group that marks an ethnic group; moreover, those distinguishing features are often vilified by the dominant group to justify and thus perpetuate ethnic group subordination.

In order to understand how Mexican transnational immigrants negotiate their place in a contemporary cosmopolitan city such as Chicago, concepts such as ethnicity and culture must be differentiated in this way to explain how transnational immigrants can be at once members of more than one cultural community (i.e., be, in effect, bicultural) without being fully integrated into either. Furthermore, we may also gain insight into the concept of "culture" if – in accordance with the spirit of this work which focuses on the analogical nature of proverbs – we think of it in terms of an analogy rather than in terms of denotation. John Van Maanen (1988: 3) makes what to my mind is an excellent analogy when he rather glibly likens anthropology to biology. "[C]ulture," he writes, is "a concept as stimulating, productive, yet fuzzy to fieldworkers and their readers as the notion of life is for biologists and their readers." If we accept the comparison, we begin to understand why "culture" is such an elusive, yet quite familiar, concept. Just as we tend to have a clear sense of what qualifies something as being alive (growth, metabolism, reproduction, response to stimuli) but do not know the intrinsic cause of life, we have the sense that culture is all around us and consists of features such as beliefs, social behaviors, personal appearance, ways of speaking and communicating, ways of relating to our environment, ways of thinking (i.e., what assumptions may be made or inferences drawn) – but we still do not know the intrinsic basis of culture. So cultural anthropology is like biology in its scientific approach to its object of study, particularly in its identification of the individual domains or features that constitute the complex whole.

One of the various domains that contribute to the understanding of the cultural whole is language-in-use (which takes context into account, as opposed to language in the abstract which focuses on language purely in terms of its systematic properties). Within this domain, we find such subcategories as verbal art, and, below that, particular instances of it, such as proverbs. Focusing on proverb-use as an instantiation of the domain of language-in-use allows us to consider proverbs as social tools that are employed to carry out particular functions in common social interaction. Not only that, but by identifying those functions we are closer to articulating why and how discourse comes to be an essential component of culture.

In fact, the conception of proverbs as social tools allowed me to identify in such popular and unassuming expressions the tripartite combination of the

prosodic, the figurative, and the social, which is a more conventional rendering of the abstract phenomena with which this book is concerned: language, thought, and culture. That is, in the mental processing of proverbs we witness a minor miracle of meaning-making; we see the impressive ability of the mind to relate a number of components – quite often in less than a second – in order to render what appears to be an irrelevant comment into a pertinent and intelligible idea.

For instance, the processing of proverbs begins with the recognition that an utterance is indeed a proverb, and this is primarily the result of its *prosody* (think "language" here) which often consists of poetic elements:

- A friend in **need** is a friend in **deed** (repetition and rhyming)
- **B**rain is **b**etter than **b**rawn (alliteration)
- **If** you lie down with dogs, **[then]** you get up with fleas (syntactic parallelism and antithesis)

Then, the *figurative* nature of the expression makes it seem incompatible with the context (and if the utterance is taken literally, it is); but with the deployment of common cognitive (think "thinking" here) skills – such as mental recall, comparative thinking, generalizing, symbol recognition and reconfiguration – the implicit associations contained in the utterance are related to the context in which the proverb is uttered:

- It's the pot calling the kettle black
  (Who's the pot? Who's the kettle? And what does one calling the other black have to do with anything?)
- A rolling stone gathers no moss
  (Who's the stone? What is moss supposed to be? Is it good or bad that no moss is gathered?)
- The early bird catches the worm
  (What's the worm? And what does being early have to do with catching it?)

Finally, the *social* dimension (think "culture" here) emerges when we consider that these cryptic expressions surely work against efficient communication unless they are employed for a purpose that more transparent comments would fail to execute:

- Let sleeping dogs lie
  (Why not simply say "don't start trouble"?)
- Strike while the iron is hot
  (Why not simply say "when you're ready to do something, don't hesitate"?)
- You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink
  (Why not simply say "you can't force others to do what's good for them"?)

On the assumption that proverbs are uttered to share rather than to withhold information from the addressee, we can say that proverbs are employed because they serve a function that the plain comments don't quite fulfill. As has been suggested by Obeng (1996) and Domínguez Barajas (2005: 92), one such function served by proverbs is that of socialization. By virtue of granting the listeners the opportunity to come to their own interpretation of a proverb's meaning and a speaker's intention in uttering it, the listeners become active participants in the discursive enterprise. That is, rather than simply summarize a general observation, proverbs involve listeners with their enigmatic character, which leads listeners to assess the situation a particular proverb is called on to instantiate. This is particularly important in cases when the proverb is used to give advice and in which the speaker of the proverb wants to respect the autonomy of the recipient of the proverb. But this is only one of several social functions of the proverb.

Another social function is the promotion of group solidarity by virtue of identifying shared referents in everyday interaction. In making reference to shared environments (both physical and psychological), people tend to recognize who belongs in their group and who does not. But the shared environments must constantly be reconstructed psychologically because referents don't necessarily hold a constant meaning. Let us consider animals for example. Although we may recognize animals as concrete referents, not all of us might associate the same ideas with a referent such as "dog" for instance. In this case, while some of us might be thinking "loyal, fun pet" others might be thinking "vulgar, despicable, cowardly" (as when the word "dog" is used as an insult), and even others might think "lascivious; promiscuous," as the term is used in popular U.S. slang.

If concrete referents can be semantically ambiguous when they are used figuratively, we can only imagine how the ambiguity is exacerbated in relation to abstract referents, particularly those embodied in verbs, such as "to bond" or "to care for." For example, does the word "bond" refer to the same thing when men "bond" and when atoms "bond"? Does "care" mean the same thing when we "care for one another" as when someone "handles things with care"?

Given the prevalence of referential and semantic ambiguity, it is important for members of a social group to ensure continuously that they interpret things in the same way because their solidarity depends on shared perception and understanding.

Shared meaning, then, is always a social and continuous activity, as Dan Sperber writes. In fact, Sperber (1996), while discussing folk-taxonomies, suggests that human beings are always engaging in taxonomic activity in an effort to conceptually manage their environment. The taxonomic effort leads to paradigms that are revealed in the popular expressions that people use. What this means

in regard to proverbs is that when an expression takes on the quality or status of "proverb" in a community, what is understood is that the expression has encapsulated a general observation to which that community subscribes. When a literal observation, such as "birds of a feather flock together," takes on a prevailing figurative sense in a community, we understand that the community has elevated that observation to the level of "proverb" and therefore treats it as a categorical and evaluative tool (in fact, a taxonomic tool that helps to situate the stimulus that prompted the utterance in relation to established paradigms – in this case, that shared traits lead to natural groupings).

Knowing those paradigms and the way to engage in their negotiation is a hallmark of culture as a practice. Figurative expressions, popular "sayings," jokes, riddles, greetings – practically any discursive practice has a cultural foundation behind it that renders it intelligible and socially functional. Just as knowing the meanings of individual words is not enough to know how language functions systematically, knowing the language of a social group is not enough to understand how that group uses language to promote collective behavior; for that we need to consider how culture, language, and thought interact.

The interaction of these profoundly human features is itself currently encapsulated in the idea of discourse. For this reason, discourse analysis has transcended disciplinary barriers to become a truly interdisciplinary endeavor. For instance, scholars in the fields of management and organization studies, Phillips and Hardy (2002) provide a definition of discourse that speaks to the theoretical potential and ambitious nature of such an analytical approach. Their definition is therefore worth quoting fully:

> Discourse, in general terms, refers to actual practices of talking and writing (Woodilla 1998). Our use of the term is somewhat more specific: We define a discourse as an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception that brings an object into being (Parker 1992). For example, the collection of texts of various kinds that make up the discourse of psychiatry brought the idea of an unconscious into existence in the 19th century (Foucault 1965). In other words, social reality is produced and made real through discourses, and social interactions cannot be fully understood without reference to the discourses that give them meaning. (Phillips and Hardy 2002: 3)

Once discourse is understood as more than simply the exchange of information through speech, but it is instead seen as an epistemological social practice – one that involves selecting, adjusting, and negotiating referents and their significance – the interpenetration of discourse and culture becomes so apparent and enlightening that it can be considered a defining aspect of culture and, therefore, a key locus of cultural analysis. Recognizing what amounts to the interpenetration of language, thought, and culture while studying the Australian Aboriginal

culture, Klapproth (2004) proposes that we should think of culture as a "web of discourses," which puts language and communication at the center of social behavior. The idea is in line with Geertz's (1973: 5) notion of culture as a semiotic system that can be analyzed by means of interpretive anthropology, but, whereas, Geertz leaves the prominence of communication implied and foregrounds the symbolic elements to be analyzed by alluding to Max Weber's "webs of significance" as the guiding idea, Klapproth alerts us with the phrase "web of discourses" not only to the role communication plays in the fashioning of a culture by virtue of being the wellspring of significance, but also to the structural properties that enable the wellspring to function as it does. For instance, Klapproth rightly observes that conceiving of culture as communication "implies two important and mutually related notions, namely, first that culture is a system of signs (i.e., a system of cognitive representations of the world), and secondly, that it must be communicated in order to be lived [. . .]. Such an approach to cultural theory sees culture therefore not simply as cognitive knowledge residing exclusively in people's minds but includes in its conception of culture the practices and processes by which such knowledge is used, exchanged and put into action" (Klapproth 2004: 35–36).

In a cultural analysis that seeks to interpret what is significant for the participants involved, the functional aspect of utterances and other means of communication, therefore, is just as important as the referential content such utterances may convey. Content itself, it must be acknowledged, is subject to interpretation, and interpretation is in turn guided by a socially-particular system of signs with its attendant conceptual moorings – in a word: discourse. That many discourses interact with and intersect one another in the life of any given individual is something that must always be kept in mind, as it would be only in the rarest of cases (e.g., isolationist groups; captives) that one would be insulated from competing discourses and have only one interpretive system by which to evaluate what is perceived. In either case, whether the individual attends to competing discourses or professes an affinity for one, the role of discourse remains the same: it is the means by which reality is constructed in so far as the discursive system deployed delimits the ideas, the language, the attitudes, the behaviors, the sentiments, and evaluations of the individual in regard to what is perceived and experienced.

In Sabean's (1984) historical analysis of the transformation of an agrarian village into an urban class-based community in Germany we have a concrete example of how discourse directly influences social reality. Sabean links the production and maintenance of community to the discursive act rather than to external realities. Borrowing ethnography's methodological consideration of the local and empirical to identify patterns informing broader contexts, Sabean sees

in the town that he studies the dialectical nature of power being manifested. His research spans three centuries in the history of the town, and he proposes that it isn't only the official authorities who determine the fate of the town but that their power is mediated as well by the traditions and dispositions of the villagers. And so he argues that

> what is common in community is not shared values or common understanding so much as the fact that members of a community are engaged in the same argument, the same *raisonnement*, the same *Rede*, the same discourse, in which alternative strategies, misunderstandings, conflicting goals and values are threshed out. Insofar as the individuals in a community may all be caught up in different webs of connection to the outside, no one is bounded in his relations by the community, and boundedness is not helpful in describing what community is. What makes community is the discourse. (Sabean 1984: 29–30)

The idea that it is the engagement in argument that drives perception more so than preexisting values is not only compatible with current conceptions of discourse analysis but also with modern rhetorical studies. In fact, works focusing on socio-historically situated discourse – such as Bauman's (1983a) account of the Quaker's speaking style being the reason for that group's ostracizing in 17th century England, or Limón's (1994) account of circulating tales by Mexican-origin Texans of encounters with the devil in the 1980s – confirm that social change and determination of meaning are rooted in the acts of discourse more so than in the reiteration of a learned corpus of values.

For instance, in his study on Quaker speaking style, Bauman documents how the decision to disavow the use of verbal politeness phenomena (e.g., greetings that implied knowledge of the unknowable to the speaker, or honorific pronouns or titles that set some people above others) on the basis of a religious conviction to reject all forms of lying, in effect, incited the non-Quaker mainstream society to regard the Quakers with suspicion, antagonism, and eventually with scorn. The Quaker choice to use language as literally as possible set them apart not only as a religious group, but it elicited a response from their counterparts that evolved into an agonistic discourse in which the Quaker ways were to be undermined and disdained so that the normative discourse would prevail. In fact, the critics of the Quaker "plain speech" equated such discursive practice with extreme inferiority, noting that when Quakers encountered people "[the Quakers] will go or ride by them as though they [the Quakers] were dumb, or as though they were beasts rather than men, not affording a salutation, or resaluting though themselves saluted" (Higginson 1653: 28, quoted in Bauman 1983a: 44). The importance of normative discursive patterns is emphatically indicated by such criticism, as they make apparent that the critics considered the failing to uphold such patterns as tantamount to lacking language, or, worse, to being subhuman.

Certainly the Quaker "plain speech" was prompted by a set of values just as the mainstream's "politeness phenomena" were prompted by another, but those values in themselves were not the catalyst of change in the society in question; it was instead the discursive encounters that they engendered that served this function. Conversely, had these two groups been so apart – not only culturally but also spatially – that their divergent discourses never intersected and acted upon each other in an intelligible way, the differences between the social values would likely have been moot.

Limón's (1994) analysis of tales involving the appearance of the devil along the Mexico-U.S. border also confirms the importance of the discursive act itself as something more than the articulation of discrete values or of referential content. In the chapter aptly titled "The Devil Dances," Limón describes how men and women interpret professed personal accounts of devil sightings at local dance halls. The first-hand witnesses and, more often, their supporters tell Limón that the devil "comes in the form of a well-dressed, quite handsome man [. . .] tall and strong in appearance. 'Con shoulders así' (with shoulders like this) [. . .]. '¡Muy elegante, con suit y todo!' (Very elegant with a suit and everything). 'Es güero, así como Robert Redford' (He's blond, like Robert Redford)" (1994: 172–173). But when the women who desire him actually become his partner on the dance floor, they discover his monstrous defect: he has hooves instead of feet. Limón questions the significance not only of the physical appearance of the devil (particularly his racial and socio-economic otherness amidst this working-class Mexican ethnic enclave) but also of the circulation and perpetuation of the account itself. The men he speaks with dismiss the account as women's gossip and unfair material demands of them (i.e., the women, it seems to the men, expect the latter to live up to an idealized masculinity that offers them financial security), while the elders consider it an actual manifestation of the supernatural, whereby the wicked are tempted and punished for licentious behavior (i.e., failing to uphold established social norms). The women, in turn, are ambivalent; they seem to accept the account at once as a warning against that which appears appealing but which is ultimately abnormal (i.e., the violation of socio-cultural norms) while they are still fascinated by the allure of transcending the norm – despite the risks involved.

For Limón, as for our concerns here, the important thing is not the veracity of the events as much as it is the "emergent collective narrative" that reveals the power of discourse in a community. The men and women involved in the telling and evaluating of the account engage in a process of reasoning that allows them to discover how they see the world, their place in it, and the options available to them. In order for them to engage with each other and fashion an understanding of who they are and who they are to become, they must first outline the forum that will

enable such engagement. Thus, it is in actual discursive exchanges involving the mediation of immediate and historical context that relationships are fashioned and the interpretation of referents is mutually negotiated to generate acceptable understandings.

Such a consideration of the impact of social context in the construction of meaning is the legacy of such influential poststructuralist theorists as Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), Pierre Bourdieu (1984 [1979]), and Michel Foucault (1972), whose respective theoretical contributions to linguistic analysis (e.g., dialogism, cultural capital, episteme) have enlightened our sense of the relationship between cognition and language as the two are dynamically linked in the social processes of meaning-making. For if Bakhtin's dialogism tells us that all words have a history that binds them to other conversations and the latter are thus in turn brought into dialogue with the ones in which we employ them, Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital tells us that such dialogism is not neutral but rather that it always involves negotiation and communication of social status and interpersonal positioning at the personal and collective levels. For his part, Foucault furthers these two useful notions by alerting us to the ideological nature of discourse, the latter being the conglomeration of texts (visual or audible or tactile) – which he calls the episteme – whose function is precisely to generate a normative way of perceiving and evaluating social and natural phenomena within a particular community (the *raisonnement* that Sabean alludes to in the quotation cited above) in order to ensure the community's own solidarity and the forestalling of its own experience of Babel – even as the veil of its own collective subjectivity remains invisible for the most part to the members of the given discourse community.

Fully conversant with such analytical insights into the dimensions of discourse, my consideration of social context is a crucial aspect of the discursive analysis presented here. The social context for the López social network's use of proverbs is not limited to the participants, the setting, and the time, but it is also inclusive of the apparent intentions, the cultural frameworks, and the socio-political factors surrounding the discursive choices made continuously by these particular users of language. Those choices reveal a common means by which the social network ensures its progress and collective orientation and manages, on a day-to-day basis, to keep its crisis of communication at bay. If we accept that negotiating meaning is tantamount to solidarity building, the López social network invests as much time as any other discourse community on fashioning shared perceptions. The result is, indeed, up to this point a closely knit community of Mexican transnational immigrants who engage in the fashioning and refashioning of their community and therefore their culture every time they employ, affirm, negate, or adjust their socially-sanctioned forms of ex-

pression – such as the proverb – and the evaluative paradigms those expressive forms evoke.

In fact, this account of the discursive significance of proverb use is concerned with multilayered figurative poles that serve as points of orientation when thinking about the cultural and social origins of ideas, expressions, and the behaviors they inform and promote. Sometimes the poles can be located geographically and semiotically, as when the points of reference are either the car-lined streets of metropolitan Chicago or the grove-covered hills nestling the villages of western Mexico. Other times, the poles are understood in terms of a personal dimension, as when differences in occupation or personality create chasms between members of the community. And other times, the poles take on temporal significance, as when generational distance is at once manifested and nullified when proverbs are used to offer counsel and tacitly communicate social values that characterize the basis of the network's solidarity. Recognizing the multifaceted aspects of discourse as an analytical lens helped me ensure that my analysis of my own social network would not privilege only one consideration of a situation nor discard another on the basis of its commonplace.

There was, however, another personal dimension to this project that went beyond my participation in the community studied and a desire to shed light on its discursive practices; it was the growing awe that the study of language evoked in me. I use the term "awe" with its archaic meaning in mind: admiration inspired by fear. I realized this after having a disheartening dream in which I tried to speak to someone who was not bilingual and whose language did not have the expression I wanted to use because it seemed so accurate. In my dream, I understood not only that the idea I wanted to communicate would be rendered crudely – and by extension, inaccurately – but that there was a gulf between me and my interlocutor because the latter did not have the ability to switch between mentally juxtaposed linguistic systems as though they were the parallel bars on which a gymnast performs (what Guerra [2004] in a more technical sense has referred to as "transcultural repositioning"); my interlocutor's monolingualism did more than inspire pity in me – it filled me with despair at the possibility of achieving true communication.

The idea of being at once in two cultures as a result of having mastery of two languages filled me with curiosity just as it filled me with insecurity about my ability to analyze successfully the relationship between the two. I have since relegated the despair my dream evoked to the back of my mind, but I can't say that I forgot about the issues with which it was fraught: Is language ever transparent? Can cultural differences ever be completely verbalized or must they be lived in order to be understood? Do people think differently as a result of the means of communication (the symbol systems) they use?

The more I ponder such questions, the more I realize that not only are language and culture intertwined, but so is cognition. After all, pragmatics as a subdiscipline of linguistics makes the case that we may understand a particular utterance in a variety of ways because meaning is not inherent in the linguistic components that we choose, but instead it is a product of inferences that are enabled by experience, convention, and intention. So that a person's thinking *patterns* are a product of the interaction between external social factors and internal processes (i.e., the workings of the mind).

Looking at language as a structural pattern merely explains its systematicity; it does not explain the elusiveness of meaning. For the latter, language has to be considered as a socio-cognitive phenomenon.

The following chapters thus explore the discursive and cognitive dimensions of proverb use within a social network of transnational Mexican immigrants as a basis for theorizing the relationship between language, culture, and thought processes. The social network's use of proverbs in both of its residential poles, Chicago and Janácuaro (that latter being a pseudonym for the network's home town in Mexico's western state of Michoacán), is examined in an attempt to consider culture holistically. That is, this book treats culture as an amalgam of linguistic, cognitive, and symbolic processes. Based on the principal tenet that language use, cognition, and symbolic behavior are inextricably bound, proverbs are considered an empirical vehicle by which the consideration of this multifaceted view of meaning-making is enabled. The importance of understanding what is involved in meaning-making is of great significance in nearly every area of intellectual pursuit, but for the purposes of this book the area of focus is meaning-making involving a spoken form that reveals higher-order reasoning skills. This area of focus is, almost by necessity, then considered in relation to literacy concerns. I say that this juxtaposition of areas is one born out of necessity because the research of the last four decades into the relationship between orality and literacy has rendered it so. Every time someone makes observations about oral forms of communication, there is immediate speculation concerning the differences between those who "merely" speak and those who can write; or to put it another way, difference is accounted for on the basis of discursive practices and, presumably, the degree of metacognitive awareness they involve. In fewer words, there is a persistent literacy bias concerning cognitive ability that needs to be kept in check every so often, and this book seeks to do that by demonstrating that oral means of communication are as cognitively demanding as their written counterparts.

A crucial linch-pin in such a multifaceted conception of culture is social context. Given that, as Clifford Geertz (1975: 5) has suggested, culture is a system of symbolic behavior, it is important to keep in mind that social context plays an important role in the assigning of meaning to any symbolic element;

that is, any symbolic item has to be situated in its system in order for us to recognize how it functions. For this reason, proverbs are considered here in context, or as part of the system in which they served a function. Proverbs, thus, are not treated here the way they would be treated in a proverb dictionary: as autonomous elements that can be understood at face value and apart from the situations in which they were considered useful and in which they were thus employed. Proverbs are seen, instead, as communicative tools that contribute to the desired goal of people engaged in communication, but these tools – despite the unchanging aspect of their surface forms – are remarkably multifunctional because it is not their form but the social context and adaptive human reasoning that invest them with meaning.

Additionally, proverbs, as an oral tradition exemplifying verbal art, are a direct means for considering the collective perception that is assumed in any idea of culture because their anonymous origin and continuous reiteration across time, space, and speakers indicate a collective effort on the part of the communities that use them. Proverbs, then, not only make evident what a group of people consider time-honored forms of expression, but they also articulate some of the values and cultural underpinnings of a community. The proverb's particular properties (e.g., pithy, witty, analogical, poetic, mnemonic, traditional) allow more than the expression of an abstract idea in a highly efficient way; they, perhaps more importantly, also stress how that idea and its expression in that particular form reaffirm cultural bonds. Thus the intertwining of the cultural and linguistic strands becomes apparent.

The third strand – how figurative expressions, such as the proverb, come to be understood – calls for the consideration of cognitive processes. Why do we recognize a proverb when we hear it? What allows one person to process (i.e., recognize, understand, apply) a proverb better, or more easily, than another person might? This concern brings us back to the cultural and linguistic intermingling, but not entirely because the complex cognitive strategies used in the processing of proverbs are not completely subsumed under either cultural constructs or linguistic functions. That is, the cognitive tasks that are performed in the successful processing of proverbs, such as the recognition of symbols and comparative thinking, are to be seen as something separate from particular cultural behaviors or discrete linguistic forms despite the fact that the latter two may be both involved in the processing of proverbs.

It is thus that the cultural, the linguistic, and the cognitive converge in this discursive approach to the examination of meaning-making. This approach stems, in particular, from the theoretical constructs of Dell Hymes. Since his conception of the ethnography of speaking (Hymes 1962), which eventually evolved into the ethnography of communication (Gumperz and Hymes 1964), Hymes placed an

emphasis on the study of language use, rather than on the tradition of looking at language as an abstract, systematic phenomenon which could be studied without regard to context. The concept of studying how culture influenced communicative practice allowed for the study of actual practices in language use across communities, and enabled researchers to compare how language-use differed across communities and situations. Language is thus seen as a dynamic social force, not simply as a rule-governed – and thus predictable – system of communication. The move to study language as a socially-contextualized phenomenon promoted the examination of language as a product and producer of culturally-relevant factors in the communicative practices of particular social groups. Hymes (1972) explicitly described some salient aspects of communicative exchanges to which a researcher needed to attend in an ethnographic analysis of communication, such as setting, participants, message form, message content, rules for interaction, and norms of interpretation, among others. These aspects of communication were indicative of the holistic view of language, culture, and communication. A premise underlying this view is that variation across linguistic communities and practices may render very different meanings for native participants than for non-natives. This is to say that those who are not privy or sensitized to the particular linguistic practices and nuances of a given linguistic community are likely to be led down the path of misunderstanding upon encountering them. Those who are familiar with the communicative nuances and norms of a given linguistic community, then, can be said to have communicative competence (which subsumes linguistic competence) within that community, and such competence is, clearly, an essential component in the process of meaning-making.

This book, then, is based on Hymes's consideration of communicative competence and builds on these assumptions: 1) context must be taken into account when conducting analysis of language use in order to reach a faithful understanding of what was communicated in any given communicative act, and 2) communities (re)create their cultural bonds by privileging certain means of communication that make manifest particular social values in regard to content and form.

These two assumptions undergird the examination of proverb use by the social network on which this book focuses. The social network itself consists mainly of the López family, who are transnational Mexican immigrants living in Chicago, and their extended family, most of whom live in Mexico's state of Michoacán. To the degree that the immigrant background and immigration experience of the López social network is generalizable, examining the information gathered from this particular group of *mexicanos*[4] provides a sense of the linguistic practices

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4 Ethnic labels are often as useful as they are misleading. The term *mexicano* is employed here not to convey an official designation of national citizenship but to empha-

that are common in the western region of Mexico, a region which has been generally considered to be one of the principal points of origin of many Mexican immigrants in the Chicago area.[5]

The presence of a large Mexican-origin population in the third largest city in the U.S., and the current milestone reached by the overall Latino population in the U.S. (which is overwhelmingly represented by people of Mexican origin) in becoming the largest ethnic minority in the country, both speak to the need for detailed – rather than merely statistical – social information regarding this sector of the population.

Ironically, the statistical presence verified by the U.S. census has served to highlight just how anonymous the Mexican-origin population has been. Owing in part to the media's skewed depiction of Latinos in general (Portales 2002; Santa Ana 2002), people of Mexican origin are generally fashioned in the collective imagination as poor, violent, vice-ridden, uneducated, alienated and alienating individuals. Such stereotypes are hard to dispel when actual ethnographic information and insider perspectives are lacking. What is worse is that the proliferation of such images is bound not only to have a negative effect on the opinion that non-Mexicans have of Mexicans but also on the opinion Mexicans – particularly the young ones – have of themselves. The ramifications of such an insidious phenomenon have yet to be exhaustively investigated, but it seems unlikely that the effects of such systematic stigmatization are minimal.

One way to rectify such systematic stigmatization and misrepresentation is to conduct qualitative research such as this one. In addition to complementing the sterile statistics proffered by the U.S. Census and other quantitative studies, qualitative studies reveal the multiple-dimensions of social interaction, self-perception and motivation, and the complex dynamics of language, culture and thought in the interpretation of situations and events (in a phrase: the fabrication of meaning). The examination of discursive and cognitive phenomena requires a qualitative approach because statistics, questionnaires, and even standard approaches to interviewing invariably fail to reveal the complex relationship between the discourse (its features and patterns) and the social and

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size that cultural affinity sometimes supersedes those official designations, so that the term identifies people of Mexican origin who primarily identify with Mexican culture regardless of their actual nationality.

5 This general claim is supported by the statistics of the Mexican Consulate in Chicago, which indicate that out of the 530,462 people of Mexican origin living in Chicago, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, nearly 200,000 of them are from Michoacán. Of course, it must be kept in mind that those statistics are limited to the number of Mexicans who make use of the Consulate's services and are not necessarily indicative of census-gathering procedures.

communicative contexts that enable them. Furthermore, as Farr (2006) and De Fina (2003) have observed, there is a general dearth of information about the discursive practices of Mexican-origin peoples living in the Unites States. In fact, when Mexican-origin groups do receive the attention of scholars, the attention is premised on migratory concerns, concerns which are in turn further delimited by disciplinary focus, so that the end result are studies that emphasize the "sociological, economic, social psychological, [and] anthropological" to the exclusion of the discursive (De Fina 2003: 3).

Ignorance of the discursive practices across ethnic groups harms not only the members of the subordinate community but also those of the dominant one because it contributes to mutual social alienation. In such a social context, non-mainstream modes of expression – if not languages and concomitant cultural practices as a whole – are seen as obstacles in the path to acquisition of privileged forms. This pattern of supplantation is most evident in mainstream language-learning classrooms wherein the target language assumes hegemonic status and the students' first language, or L1, is patently relegated to a subordinate status. This is the case in most English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classrooms at the elementary and secondary scholastic levels.[6] In such settings, the outcome is, at best, the acquisition of the target language with the fossilized retention of the students' L1, or the outright rejection of the students L1 in favor of the target language. In either case, the subtractive nature of this approach ensures a passive or active journey toward sociolinguistic alienation for the member of the ethnolinguistic minority. The alienation is felt either toward the native community when its discursive practices fail to garner the respect of the mainstream, or it is felt toward the mainstream one because allegiance to the native community is valued over that to the mainstream. What is more, the manifestation of the alienation may remain latent into adulthood, as young people often fail to realize the significance of the sociolinguistic loss until they mature and recognize that linguistic practices are intertwined with cultural practices, views, and therefore social affinities.

Dual-language programs promise to work on the basis of an additive rather than a subtractive approach to language learning. In encouraging the *maintenance and development* of minority language speakers' L1 in diglossic societies, such programs present one corrective measure to language loss (Pérez 2004). However, even such approaches have to contend with the socially-dominant-language's hegemonic effect that compels young people to select the language that is associated with power (that of the mainstream) over the language associated with subordination (that of the ethnic community) (Potowski 2005).

6 See Judd (2000: 167–168) for a description of the different types of ESL classrooms.

The study of proverbs as a discursive practice that reveals higher-order thinking skills is, therefore, of importance for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the documentation of non-mainstream cultural and communicative behavior that informs our understanding of how language promotes or undermines social participation and individual advancement. Secondly, the cognitive skills evidenced in the use of proverbs are those that are expected in schools. Such a focus on literacy skills is urgently needed because these are arguably the foundation of academic success, and the latter is something that Latinos in this country are generally not achieving. Given the reality that classrooms are increasingly multicultural and multilinguistic contact zones (Pratt 1991), the argument presented in the following chapters is that cognitive skills, literacy, and discursive practices have to be considered in tandem to better serve diverse populations, which benefits society as a whole. Thus, the collection of data concerning language use in particular ethnolinguistic communities (of which, this volume may be seen as an example) is a fundamental step in assessing the relationship(s) between thinking, speaking, and academic success – for how can we speak about the result or consequences of "what students linguistically bring with them to the classroom" before we are aware of what the "what" is?

Nevertheless, an important clarification must be made in regard to this issue: the data presented here were culled from adult participants not juveniles. Those readers expecting to find in this book details about the actual use of proverbs by juveniles will be disappointed because there are no accounts of such a practice in this book. This, however, should not be taken to mean that the data that are presented are irrelevant to the matter of education, for it should be apparent that the linguistic practice on which this book focuses is part of the expressive economy of a community – rather than simply a manifestation of individual idiosyncratic behaviors – and, as such, this practice should be seen as a plausible discursive influence on the school-age children who are part of the ethnolinguistic community in question, even as the adults remain the focus of this particular analysis. It is also for this reason that the educational considerations presented in this book are presented in general terms rather than on the basis of concrete data culled from juvenile members of the community. Having made this clarification, I, nevertheless, agree that the collection of such data is something that should be done, and in this book's epilogue I suggest that such data may lead to very practical insights in regard to literacy theory and instruction in addition to socialization phenomena.

Thus, the aim of this book is admittedly ambitious, for it not only seeks to examine the linguistic features surrounding proverb use among a group of *mexicanos* in order to give a sense of this vibrant community's discursive repertoire, but it also seeks to relate the information that results from this analysis to one

salient educational concern: the evaluation of literacy practices – especially as these are linked to higher order thinking skills. In regard to literacy itself, it must also be said that this book treats it as more than the discrete skills of encoding and decoding alphabetic symbols; literacy is instead conceived as interpretive and social skills that require sophisticated reasoning, meta-awareness of language, mastery of conventional forms of expression, and the critical consideration of context and source in the evaluation of information. What is more, literacy is further considered not only as a conglomerate of discrete, quantifiable skills, but as contextualized – and thus context-specific – social practices involving discourse and texts. This understanding of literacy is the legacy of the New Literacy Studies scholars (e.g., Szwed 1981; Heath 1983; Street 1984; Graff 1987) who propose, as I do, that context – be it social, cultural, historical, political, economic, or personal – exerts great influence on perception and, by extension, on behavior.

Such a two-fold focus, the discursive analysis of ethnographically-based data and the articulation of the educational relevance of the findings that result from such an analysis, is what is presented in the rest of this book in order to shed some light on this Mexican social network's sociolinguistic practices – and quite plausibly those of others like it.

Chapter 2
The López social network and its proverbs

2.1. A cold welcome

Judging by the number of times that María López uses the proverb, *Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres* [Tell me who you walk with, and I will tell you who you are],[1] it would be fair to say that it is one of her favorites. It seems a fitting choice given that one of her major preoccupations is the social bonds that she either maintains or breaks, particularly as this affects her family. In fact, one of the most notable characteristics that she attributes to her family is that it is *muy unida*, very close. Indeed the López family, and the relatives that make up their extended social network, spent much of their time together during the three years during which the data on proverb-use were collected for this book. Of the twenty-seven network members, twenty are bound by kinship, which in part explains their high degree of social interaction, but unlike similar immigrant social networks they are not co-workers. Despite this, the feel of the group is that of a dense multiplex-social network (Milroy 1980, 1987), which is described as one in which the members spend much of their social time together by interacting regularly in the various domains of social life such as workplace, worship site, home, leisurely gatherings, or other setting that involves exchange of goods, information, and time. The more domains shared and time spent interacting with one another, the stronger the social ties tend to be because the members become prominent figures in each other's lives by virtue of creating a "dense web" of relationships with one another (i.e., they may be at once relatives, co-workers, friends, religious brethren, teammates or club members, political affiliates, etc.).

The network has thrived at both of its residential poles – Chicago and Janácuaro (a rural farming village situated in the northeast corner of Michoacán, Mexico) – precisely because its members refuse to allow the distance to sever their social ties and because they assist one another in times of crisis. The foundational bond is kinship; twelve of the twenty seven members in the network are part of the nuclear López family that serves as its hub in Chicago (two parents,

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1 The translations of the Spanish proverbs found throughout the book will be rather literal to ensure that their metaphorical component is recognized. This may make the English rendition appear awkward at times; in regard to cases where the awkwardness is particularly distracting, a more nuanced English translation will be presented.

five daughters, and five sons), and the rest are close relatives such as aunts and uncles and their children. The network is further reinforced by the presence and participation of long-time friends at both residential poles.

Thus, when María López uses the proverb mentioned above, the idea expressed in it corresponds well with her own sense of a defining aspect of her identity and that of her social network. Because solidarity has been a crucial component of her social network's successful adaptation to their host community, it is no surprise that she has a particular predilection for it. Since her putative cousin, Josefina Cortez, invited María to visit her in the U.S. in the early 1970s, the members of the Lopéz social network have relied on each other to overcome not only the common cultural and economic barriers most recent immigrants face in a new country but also the outright hostility that even some members of their own ethnic group at times manifest toward the newly arrived.

Ana, the eldest of María's daughters, remembers an event that encapsulates the traumatic experience that she and the rest of the network members found their migratory move to be when she and her siblings joined their parents, María and Aristeo, a few years after the latter two had themselves immigrated to Chicago.

For Ana and her siblings, their first winter in Chicago was not only characterized by infamous bone-chilling winds the city is known for, but also by an even more desolating reality: immigrants were unwelcome – even by those who would be expected to see in their origin an aspect of themselves. During our interview, more than two decades after the incident, a veiled grimace still invades Ana's face as she recalls what she experienced with her sisters Lisa and Tita. The fear that initially accompanied that disbelief is now almost entirely replaced with indignation and a degree of contempt. To think that their own Mexican-origin neighbors had not only shunned them but actually intimidated them seems unusually cruel and despicable to the sisters.

The year was 1976, and the López family had secured their own apartment in Chicago's west side after residing temporarily with the Cortez family. The neighborhood's racial segregation was physically represented, as in many towns across the country, by the freight railroad tracks that ran right through it. North of the tracks lay South Lawndale with its African-American population, and south of them was Little Village, one of the clearly defined Mexican neighborhoods, more commonly known as 26th St.

Little Village, or "La Villita" as the Spanish-speaking residents also dubbed it, was starting to replace the 18th St. Pilsen neighborhood as the port of entry for many recently arrived Latinos. It was and continues to be a working-class part of town with gang problems, inter-racial and intra-ethnic tensions, and an increasing Latino population that was creating what is still an evident westward corridor beginning in Chicago's near-west side and ending in its near-west suburbs.

By the time the López family had left Josefina's single-family home and settled in their own apartment, the reality of racially-charged violence between Latinos and African-Americans was, sadly, a matter of course for everyone in the neighborhood, including the new arrivals. In fact, one of the first things the latter were instructed was to avoid their neighbors to the north and never to use the Spanish word "negro" to refer to them in their presence – "moreno/a"[2] ("swarthy") would certainly be a better choice of words if one wanted to avoid trouble.

What was still being learned, however, was that national origin was also a matter of discord among Latinos themselves. The few Puerto Ricans living in the area found that their Mexican neighbors didn't like the way they spoke Spanish, their music, their dance, or their "swagger." The López family, in turn, found that they too were the object of disdain simply for being new arrivals, and they learned this first hand, as Ana and Lisa López (then 16 and 14 years old, respectively) recall:

> *El departamento al que nos cambiamos estaba a sólo dos cuadras de la casa de mi tía Josefina. Cuando llegamos vivimos con ella unas semanas y luego nos mudamos ahí. Para entonces la mayoría de la gente en el barrio ya eran latinos, pero todavía había unos cuantos americanos, y unos de ellos vivían como a tres casas del edificio al que nos mudamos.*
> [The apartment we moved to was only two blocks away from my aunt Josefina's house. When we arrived, we stayed with her a few weeks and then we moved there. By then, most of the people in the neighborhood were already Latinos, but there were still a few [white] Americans, and some of them lived like three houses down from the building we moved to.]

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2 The adjective "moreno" is derived from the noun "Moor." This is yet another example of how language and culture become interpenetrated as a result of fixed semantic meanings that carry with them social attitudes through time and space. In this case, the socio-cultural practice that continues to get transmitted to Spanish speakers using this term is the simultaneous identification of a group of people just as much by their place of origin (i.e., the Moors are generally considered to be the people of the northern coast of Africa, descendants of the Berber Mauri ethnic group) as by the color of their skin (the term Mauri is considered to have its origin in the Greek word for "black"–*mavros*). In regard to this matter, the Oxford English Dictionary offers this note: "The semantic development from 'inhabitant of North Africa' to 'dark brown, black'. . . occurred already in post-classical Latin and may also be seen in Hellenistic Greek μαῦρος black (unless this is aphetic <ἀμαυρός blind). The semantic development to 'Muslim'. . . is also found for Spanish *moro* and Portuguese *mouro* (from 1513 in this sense)" (Moor 2008).

The building was a typical brick two-flat with a "garden apartment" (half-sunk basement) that actually made the structure appear to be three stories high. It was also longer than the neighboring single-family homes that stood to each of its sides, and the next two-flat to its north. In effect, the building that was the López's new home jutted out a full one fourth of its length further into the backyard than its near-twin two lots away. It was in that next two-flat that lived a single mother with her two boys, one a pre-teen and the other an adolescent, all of them with dark-brown skin, straight black hair, aquiline noses, and broad mouths. Their Mexican origin, like that of many of the other residents to the south of the tracks, was unmistakable. Lisa continues the account Ana has begun in this way:

> *Nuestro cuarto era el que quedaba hasta atrás, y una de las dos ventanas que tenía daba al norte. Llevábamos como dos o tres meses cuando un sábado por la mañana me despierta el ruido como de un golpe seco. Después de un ratito, otro golpe que cimbró la ventana. Después otros dos golpes, casi al mismo tiempo. Algo estaba golpeando la ventana y me levanté a ver qué era.*
> [Our bedroom was the last room in the apartment, and one of the two windows it had faced north. We had lived there for two or three months when one Saturday morning the sound of a blunt blow wakes me up. After a little while, another blow shook the window pane. Then another two blows, almost at the same time. Something was striking the window and I got up to see what it was.]

It had snowed the night before, but the mild morning temperature had begun to melt through the white frozen crust. What should have been the experience of waking to a pristine winter landscape became instead a source of distress for Lisa upon hearing an ominous blunt sound. She walked to the window and pushed aside the curtain to see what it was, and immediately let the curtain fall back in place when she saw the two neighboring boys hurling snowballs at her now framed visage. She thought they would stop after realizing that she had seen them, but they instead shouted insults with every snowball they threw. Ana and her sisters recall only one word that the boys hollered because they heard it enough times thereafter: "brazers." The term was clearly an anglicized version of the Spanish word "bracero" (literally derived from the word *brazo* – arm), which was historically the name for guest workers in the U.S. under various plans from 1942–1964, but which the boys now directed at newly arrived Mexican immigrants with unbridled scorn. The anglicized pronunciation of a word that tellingly revealed in its etymology what the Mexican immigrants represented for U.S. interests underscored the allegiance the boys professed. They wanted to disassociate themselves completely from the disempowered foreigners who had recently moved in, lest their American neighbors should begin to perceive them as alien also. The boys stopped hurling snowballs when Ana threatened

to call the police, but the boys' message had already been clearly delivered and they knew it. Thereafter, the girls and their siblings were more wary of how they were perceived, even by those who at first glance appeared to be like them.

In light of the rejection, discrimination, and hostility that the members of the López social network have faced to varying degrees while living in the U.S., the importance of conveying solidarity is understandable. The discursive means of communicating solidarity is no less important than the material and informational support the members offer to each other. That is, shared discursive practices affirm the social bonds that facilitate the sharing of resources and mutual trust upon which an otherwise besieged social group depends. In using time-honored forms of expression, such as proverbs, the members of the López social network reaffirm cultural and interpersonal bonds in an overarching social context that underscores their foreignness. Additionally, for the members of the older generation in the network, the preservation of traditional forms of expression, along with the mother tongue, represents a continuity that unites them to their younger relatives despite their place of residence or the lapse of time between personal visits. That the network has successfully maintained its social ties across national boundaries despite its prolonged stay in the U.S. – even to the point that the younger members have become bicultural – attests to the importance of cultural and linguistic practices in the fashioning of a shared frame of reference and sense of identity.

2.2. Origins of the López social network

In many regards, the López social network gives a face to the government statistics on the Mexican-origin populations in Chicago. They are part of the wave of Mexican immigration that characterized the 1970s, and which the U.S. Census documents as contributing to a 210% rise in the Mexican-origin population in the city between 1970 and 1980, when the population numbers rose from 82,097 to 254,656 respectively (U.S. Census 1983).

The López social network followed a common pattern of migration that relies on the good will of an adventurous soul who scouts the foreign terrain and then beckons to the rest of her clan. That figure for the López social network was Josefina Cortez, who found herself living in Chicago after marrying Manuel Cortez, a U.S. citizen who had fallen in love with her while vacationing in Mexico.

Josefina Cortez and María López have always been close friends, so close as to consider themselves kin despite the lack of actual blood ties. Not only have Josefina and María known each other since childhood, but their families have had an amicable relationship extending back two generations, and so the two

women were raised to treat each other as cousins. María, being a few years older than Josefina, was the first to marry and bear children, two of which Josefina christened, thus becoming *comadre* to María and Aristeo.

Compadrazgo, the term used to identify the relationship between parents and godparents, was a serious commitment at that time, as it amounted not only to an expression of social affinity but to a promise of co-parenting in a literal and moral sense. In more traditional communities the term is still taken to mean this, but changes in values and conceptions of relationships have diminished the level of mutual commitment among the younger generations. For instance, the López male siblings – playing on the initial phonetic similarity between the words *compañero* [partner or companion] and *compadre* – jokingly use the latter to address each other, despite not being godfathers to each other's children. This practice prompted their grandmother to ask them rather sternly on one occasion to "explain, once and for all, on what pretenses [they were] calling each other *compadres*." As an elder and firm believer in social decorum, their grandmother recognized the honorific quality of the term as well as its implied reference to the parenting of a child, and, missing the play on words, she demanded to know what child they were alluding to. Her seriousness clearly intimated a degree of worry that references to an "illegitimate" child were being bandied about, and she relaxed only after being assured that the term was simply being used frivolously by her grandsons.

The significance of *compadrazgo*, however, was not lost on Josefina and María, and their social ties were thus further reinforced by it. A few years after residing in Chicago and learning of the economic strain facing the López family in the mid 1970s, Josefina asked María to visit her in Chicago, with the intention of getting her to consider immigrating, which María eventually did. The migratory path was so established, and Aristeo followed his wife's steps a year later.

The López family thus became in some ways emblematic of the Mexican migratory wave that resulted from the Mexican economic crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s. During that time, the Mexican economy was characterized by a decrease in diversified exports, increased foreign debt, a shrinking gross national product, currency devaluations ranging from 40% to 55%, and annual inflation rates reaching the 100% mark or above (Merrill and Miró 1997: 57–60). Having up to that point tasted the possibility of joining the growing middle class, the couple now swallowed the bitter reality of their economic downturn, and the uprooting of most of the family in 1976 uncannily coincided with the first devaluation of the national currency in over two decades. The experience of being forced to leave her country for economic reasons was so traumatic for María that to this day she finds it difficult to place much stock in claims of a looming economic prosperity in Mexico.

The couple left their children in Mexico City under the care of Tere, María's sister, but after more than a few years apart, they decided to have their six younger children smuggled into the country, which they managed to do successfully. The older López children, being four males in their late teens and early twenties, were expected to finish their education in Mexico and take care of the family home there. They managed to do the latter but not the former, and eventually also immigrated to Chicago and secured legal residency – as did their siblings – under the United States Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.

Like many of their fellow immigrants, the members of the López social network have since made a life for themselves that is enmeshed in the social fabric of their host city. They first settled in the predominantly Mexican-origin neighborhood of Chicago's west side, where bilingual education was afforded to the children, and local businesses catered their services and goods to the ethnic population. The parents and older siblings have worked in the service and manufacturing industries to ensure that the younger members of the family could devote themselves to getting an education. Although the parents in the family do not speak English fluently, their children are all fully bilingual, with the younger members being fully bicultural. The family became part of another growing demographic change in the 1980s by moving from the west side of Chicago to one of its western suburbs. This move appears not to be unique given that the 2000 U.S. Census reveals not only that the Mexican-origin population in Chicago is not waning, but that the outlying areas of the city have also had their own upsurge in Mexican-origin populations, with such suburbs as Stone Park, Cicero, Melrose Park, Waukegan, Berwyn, Blue Island, Bensenville, Northlake, Elgin, and Aurora having anywhere from 30 to 80% of their populations self-identifying as being of Mexican-origin (U.S. Census 2001). The exodus from the city into the suburbs tended to flow along Chicago's main west-bound artery, but as Farr and Guerra (1995: 10) have noted, and as indicated by the townships mentioned in relation to the census data presented here, the Mexican-origin population in the metropolitan area is no longer easily circumscribed.

In terms of this statistical background, the López social network seems unremarkable. The two generations that constitute it have spent just as much of their lives in the U.S. as in Mexico, if not more so. In addition to being bound to their host city by virtue of their jobs, residence, and education, some of the younger members of the López social network have started families of their own (by marrying within and outside their ethnic group) and have had children. Yet, despite the roots that have been cast by living in Chicago for more than a quarter century, most of the members of the social network remain psychologically, socially, and economically bound to their country of origin. The López family,

for instance, maintains active ties to its country of origin at several levels: the social one (e.g., through continuous contact with relatives and friends via telephone, letters, and physical visits of acquaintances or kin to the region – with the latter occurring on the average of at least once per year), the cultural one (e.g., celebrating Mexican national holidays, maintaining religious practices, sharing a mental landscape – memories, places, people, activities – and language), and the economic one (e.g., submitting remittances, engaging in investments and buying real estate property, as well as enacting business ventures).

Like their *compadres*, Manuel and Josefina Cortez maintained their social ties to Mexico, and their affinity for their country of origin was such that by the late 1990s – given that their three children had graduated from college and were living on their own – they sold their family home in Chicago and moved back to Mexico to live as retirees.

Thus the network members' active participation in, and maintenance of ties with, the community of origin characterizes them as part of a transnational community (Schiller et al. 1992: ix), which speaks to the persistence of ethnic/cultural identity in contexts far removed from what can be thought of as the homeland. In this case, the members of the López social network who reside in the U.S. recreate psychological and cultural ties to their country of origin on a quotidian basis. By maintaining and elaborating on the oral traditions of its home community, the social network transforms its immediate social and psychological surroundings in the host community.

In Janácuaro, where Aristeo and María López were born and raised, most of the inhabitants still make a living by farming and/or marketing land produce, and, at a lower scale, by raising and selling livestock. Given the rural characteristics of the village and the recognition of agriculture as the common means of earning a living, it is not surprising to find that the network members use figurative expressions that often allude to this type of environment. In contrast, Aristeo and María's children grew up in an urban setting (Mexico City and Chicago), but they are, nevertheless, familiar with the rural setting in which their parents were brought up. Since the family did not migrate to the U.S. before all of the children were born, all of the López children experienced the life and surroundings of their parents' village by virtue of frequent visits to it during their upbringing in Mexico City and of yearly visits to it as adults living in Chicago. It is important to point this out because it highlights the familiarity with the rural environment that is often referred to in their conversations and comments. That is, the social network often refers to salient ecological features of this familiar environment to index the characterization of a given referent, and in doing so, the network reaffirms and, in fact, recreates for itself the home community at the psychological and cultural level. This is often done with proverbs and with many other oral traditions that

are shared within the network (e.g., stories, legends, anecdotes, jokes, riddles, songs, and *plática*[3]).

Aristeo and María, who are now retired and live almost half of the year in each of the two countries they call home, are in some sense the epitome of the cultural duality that characterizes the members of their social network and the experience of many immigrants in an age of globalization: they are part of two communities at once, despite the distance. Aristeo and María are in a sense a symbolic representation of the attempted, and partially realized, fusion of the best of two cultural traditions through sheer determination, effort, and sacrifice. They are a product of a rural setting that although rich in humanistic qualities and natural resources was and remains poor in terms of economic development.

For Aristeo and María, growing up in a relatively isolated farming village in the Mexican province meant a life devoted to physical labor, frugality, and hardship from the start. Aristeo ended his formal schooling after completing the 3rd grade in 1945, after intermittent appearances in school during the first 10 years of his life. After learning how to read and do arithmetic, a young Aristeo was expected to help his family run the farm, which is what he did until he migrated to Mexico City in 1952.

In terms of formal education, María faired slightly better than her husband, although she grew up under greater economic strain. María, whose father was a sharecropper because he refused to request land under the *ejido*[4] reform, worked as a delivery girl throughout most of her childhood and ended her schooling after reaching the 7th grade in 1949. She completed the first four years of primary school in succession, and, after a year hiatus, she returned for two more years of schooling before dropping out in the middle of the third.

Their lack of academic preparation and marketable skills in an urban setting limited Aristeo and María's employment options, and, like many other Mexican immigrants in Chicago, they devoted half of their adult working years to the food service industry, with Aristeo working in restaurants and María working in meat-packing factories.

The López children, in contrast and as a testament to their parents' aspiration for socio-economic improvement, have all had some college education; six of them have earned at least a Bachelor of Arts degree, and two of them have

3 *Plática* is a generic term for any type of conversation.

4 The *ejido* system is the popular name for the 1934 Mexican land reform act that granted the use, but not ownership, of parcels of farming land to anyone willing to farm them. This was modified in 1992 by *La Nueva Ley Agraria* [The New Agrarian Law], which allows *ejidatarios* [*ejido* members] to sell their land rights to other *avecinados* [residents of the *ejido* community] as long as the latter are Mexican citizens.

earned graduate degrees. Whereas the four older siblings completed most of their schooling in Mexico, the six younger ones received most of their education in the U.S. In fact, the younger members of the López family have resided in the U.S. for most of their lives, and this is reflected in their common lapses into English when they talk among themselves. Spanish, however, remains the dominant language in family-centered contexts because the parents and the older siblings have more facility of expression in their mother tongue. The older siblings were the last ones to arrive in the U.S. and are therefore not as fully bicultural as their younger siblings, although they seem to be moving steadily in that direction.

2.3. The importance of place in the construction of meaning

Because of the significance of their transnational identity, it was important to collect data in both settings that the López social network called home. In fact, all of the data were collected during visits to the houses of the network members in Chicago and Janácuaro. Most of the time, the conversations that provided the data occurred while the participants were cooking and eating evening meals, or when they were relaxing on the weekends.

The weekends were particularly important when Chicago was the locus because that was when the network members spent time as a group; during the week, time was at a premium because all of the network members were gainfully employed and had very little time to spend on anything other than routine chores and preparation for the ensuing work day.

The conversations in Janácuaro, in contrast, tended to occur at varied times – when there was a lull in the course of household chores, during trips to and from the town market, or in the evenings (since, in Janácuaro, watching television and listening to the radio have not yet entirely displaced the adults' customary evening chats, although this appears to be changing). The pace of life in Janácuaro is slower than in Chicago primarily because the network members there work on their own parcels of land. Although farming without industrial machinery is back-breaking work, the network members who live in Janácuaro can set their own hours – which often means that they go to work at sunrise and come home by early afternoon; this affords them more time to socialize with family and friends.

Surprisingly, Janácuaro has retained the feel of the rancho[5] that Aristeo and María knew while growing up. In fact, more than forty years after leaving it,

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5 A *rancho* is a rural, unincorporated settlement that is characterized by its self-sufficiency in terms of food production and housing. Their rather insular economy is

they are still remembered by the some of the older residents of the area. Since Aristeo and María moved to Mexico City, where they currently own a house, they only visit Janácuaro sporadically and for short periods (usually only a few days), so this makes it more surprising that people still remember them and can talk to them about the people and the rancho of their youth. The small-town feel of Janácuaro is likely to change, however, as the town and city nearest to this village continue to expand. The town nearest to Janácuaro is Tlantepec, located roughly two miles away, and it listed a population of 18,500 in the Mexican census for the year 2000, and the closest city is Villa Mújica, lying approximately nine miles away and claiming a population of approximately 138,000.

The terrain is another point of contrast in regard to the settings. Whereas the López family in Chicago lives in the post-industrial sprawl of a midwestern U.S. city and sees buildings and paved streets in almost every direction, the landscape surrounding the network members in Janácuaro is characterized by mountains, lush vegetation, plots of land cleared for farming on the steep side of hills, and a general sense of geographic isolation that can readily be attributed to the village's depth in the valley in which it is situated: Janácuaro is nestled amid towering mountainsides and rests at 1,300 meters (4,265 feet) above sea level, whereas Villa Mújica at only nine miles away rests at 1,940 (6,365 feet). The steep drop in altitude can be felt as deafening pressure in the ears of those who descend rapidly in the vehicles that negotiate the winding paths leading to the village. Janácuaro's relative isolation is thus, in part, explained. The López family in Chicago has not forgotten these ecological characteristics, which coincidentally match those of most of the state of Michoacán, described by the Mexican *Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía, e Informática* (INEGI) as 35% jungle, 28% forest, and 28% farming land.

Despite the overt differences between the settings in which proverbs were used, it is fair to say that most of the proverbs used by the López social network concentrated on the cataloguing of human behavior. Indeed, proverbs can be seen as complex webs of signification because they combine many of the concerns that define humanity: language, values, emotions, beliefs, reasoning, and social affinity.

For instance, Carmela, who is Aristeo's sister and one of the senior members of the social network who grew up in Janácuaro, has a young neighbor named Norma who recalled what Aristeo had said when he met her. At that time, Norma had sprained an ankle which was conspicuously bandaged, and the first thing Aristeo said to her was "*El que ha de pecar, por una pata ha de empezar*"

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often supplemented with low-scale trade with surrounding hamlets or direct product supply to merchants in the nearest town.

Figure 1. Janácuaro nestled in its valley's thick foliage

Figure 2. View of Chicago from one of its Mexican neighborhoods

[He who must sin, by one foot must begin]. This is a variant of the proverb, *El que se ha de condenar, por una mano ha de empezar* [He who is destined for damnation, has the hand as its initiation]. The version used by Aristeo is interesting because it involves adaptations to the particular situation: for one, it was not a hand that was particularly noticeable but the foot; secondly, Aristeo used the word reserved for animal appendages *pata* (instead of *pie* [foot]) , which, given the rural context and the often referenced parallels between farm animals and humans, was not seen as insulting but as comical; thirdly, the disparity in

ages between a senior member of the social network and a younger acquaintance of the group, permitted the familiarity with which Aristeo addressed someone he had just met; finally, despite Aristeo's changes to the original version (e.g., *condenar* [damnation] to *pecar* [sin]), the proverb alludes to religious belief, morality, and actions and their consequences.

By hypothesizing that it was the prominence of Norma's sprained ankle that led Aristeo to think of a clever way of commenting on it (and in the playful spirit of the comment, to try to establish a particular rapport with her), we can consider the series of inferences and implicatures that underlie the proverb itself. The injured foot can be construed as a direct result of some activity, and – following traditional notions of divine retribution for misbehavior – Aristeo saw it as a sign of comeuppance. Predestination, inevitability, and divine will are found in several other proverbs that are commonly used in Mexico, for example:

- *El que nace pa' tamal, del cielo le caen las hojas*
  [He who is destined to be a tamal has the corn husks fall to him from heaven]
- *El que nace pa' maceta, del corredor no pasa*
  [He who is born to be a flower pot doesn't make it past the porch]
- *Unos nacen con estrella, y otros estrellados*
  [Some are born to be stars, and others to be star-struck]
- *No hay mal que por bien no venga*
  [Every bad thing happens for a good reason]

Aristeo's version is easily integrated into this corpus, which facilitates the utterance's identification as a proverb. Additionally, his awareness of social context is indicated by the replacing of a harsh term such as "damnation" with "sin," a semantically related but somewhat less disturbing term which in effect mitigates the implicit claim of the proverb.

Thus we see how proverbs synthesize several social, cultural, and cognitive concerns every time they are used felicitously in social interaction. The following proverb is another example of this. José, Aristeo's third oldest son, is one the López siblings who lived most of his life in Mexico before immigrating, and consequently was quite familiar with life in Janácuaro. This put him in a position to correct any idealized notions of the network's hometown when its members tended to idealize it. One day, for instance, as we talked about the way the people in the town behaved, I mentioned that I had heard about a number of business deals that had soured because the business partners – regardless of whether they were kin or not – lacked mutual good will. In fact, I had been told that more and more often, people seemed to care only about themselves. José, grimly, confirmed this claim by saying, "*Nadie da mano sin metate*" [Nobody gives the grinding stone without the slab]. The term *mano* in relation to *metate* is

understood to be the grinding stone (resembling a rolling pin) used to mash the cooked corn on the stone slab known as the *metate*.

Figure 3. A *metate* and its *mano*[6]

In Janácuaro, these were commonplace culturally-particular implements as late as a decade ago, and they index culturally unique referents such as the pre-Columbian heritage, the ethnic food (tortillas), and the particular type of domestic labor that is part of routine life. In addition, the proverb suggests, on a more general level, that no one gives something (i.e., a tool in this case) without expecting something in return (i.e., labor in this case). Befitting the communicative efficiency of the proverb, this latter notion is conveyed without reference to work at all, but it is implied by the pairing of the two items required to carry out the particular task for which they are suited (i.e., the grinding of cooked corn into the dough from which tortillas are made).

These examples reflect how users of proverbs attend not only to several layers of signification but also to the indexing of their cultural ecology by virtue of alluding to places, things, events, and values that are construed as shared points of reference for the construction of meaning. Whether the aim of proverb use is to formulate a shared sense of collective identity, or express an observation about human nature, or to get others to employ their reasoning skills for the sake of persuasion or entertainment, users of proverbs, like the members of the López social network, engage in a complex communicative strategy every time they recall a proverb and use it as a tool for encoding and decoding meaning.

6 Photograph by Gerardo Valdez Romero.

The following two chapters takes these observations as their point of departure in the analysis of the significance of the aphoristic expressions that the members of the López network employ in their efforts to share their experiential, cultural, and mental landscapes.

Figure 4. The López social network's transnational poles

Chapter 3
Proverbs mean more than they say[1]

3.1. Proverbs in action

On a mid-November evening, the López family experiences the reason that Chicago is called The Windy City. The swift winds rattle the window panes of the family's Chicago home, and thus announce the arrival of an early winter. For the López family, however, the change of weather is not the talk of the evening. The focus of the conversation is the food, and eight people chat lively as they get ready for supper. Mrs. López, the matriarch of this family, has a rich chicken soup brewing on the stove, and she wipes her hands on her apron as she turns from the pot to the tortillas she flips on the *comal* next to the pot. In the meantime, her adult children set the table. One gathers and sets the glasses, another pours water into them, and another takes care of setting the plates and utensils. The boiling soup fills the home with its aroma and its steam glazes the windows of the now cramped kitchen.

As it is common for them, some of the López siblings who no longer live with their parents have found their way to their parents' house after work. On this day, Aristeo and María López will have six of their ten children arrive in time for dinner. The kitchen is filled with the smells of freshly cooked chicken soup and the sounds of animated conversation in Spanish and English – and sometimes a mixture of both languages. The siblings come into the house one after the other, "like sheep," says Mrs. López. When just about everyone expected is present, and the place settings have been laid on the table, Tita, one of the younger López siblings, straggles into the kitchen via the back door. She is welcomed by the aroma of soup and the sounds of chatter and laughter. Upon noticing the place settings and that several of her siblings are sitting at the table, she remarks, "*¡Ay, pero si ya están listos para comer*!" [Oh, but you're ready to eat!]. Ana, one of her older sisters, replies: "*Como dice el dicho, el que tiene hambre, le atiza a la olla*" [As the saying goes, he who is hungry stokes [the fire for] the pot]. General echoes of agreement follow in the wake of the proverb, and Tita accepts the reply with a smile.

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1 This chapter includes revised sections from Domínguez Barajas (2005).

Socially and linguistically speaking, something remarkable has happened in the brief exchange summarized above. The interlocutors have acknowledged, in a rather subtle way, the existence of a problematic situation where there might, at first glance, appear to be none. In addition, there has been a resolution of that situation without explicit mention of either the potential conflict or of the means of resolution. This lack of referential explicitness begins to illustrate the complexity of proverb use. In order to understand the function of proverbs in a conversation, we must not only be familiar with the underlying norms that govern linguistic communication in a particular group, but we must also understand the implicit analogical nature of the proverbs themselves.

For example, in the situation described above, Ana's proverb offers a literal message (i.e., stoking a fire) that seems irrelevant to Tita's apparently declarative statement (i.e., people sitting at the table ready to eat). Yet Tita appears satisfied with the reply, and the rest of the participants, in voicing assent, confirm that the reply has been appropriate. The apparently cryptic exchange begins with Tita's pointed observation of her siblings' clear intention to start having dinner without her. Tita's exclamatory tone communicates something to Ana that prompts her to reply with the proverb. The proverb itself alludes to the justification of an action (i.e., expediting the cooking of a meal) in light of a motivating situation (i.e., being hungry). Ana's implicit defense of this family's diligence in the preparation of the meal to satisfy its hunger suggests that she has understood Tita's exclamatory utterance as an objection to reprehensible behavior. That is, it would appear that Tita's comment is understood to be the equivalent of saying, "Aha! Caught you in the act!" Thus, the implication is that the rest of the family is doing something wrong, and since Tita makes reference to their readiness to have the meal, her objection is perceived to be that they are being rude by not waiting for her. This implicit accusation is acknowledged by Ana's voicing of a proverb. Since the accusation is indirectly communicated through a declarative statement, the use of the proverb helps the respondent (i.e., Ana) reply in kind (i.e., indirectly). The accusation is thus not considered openly, but it is considered nevertheless.

The participants' preference for indirection as a feature of their communicative style is embodied in the use of proverbs. With the use of indirect commentary, those who are being criticized or challenged are given the opportunity to save face by choosing to acknowledge the *sub rosa* comment or not. The very notion of giving an interlocutor the opportunity to either acknowledge or ignore a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1978) communicates first and foremost that the socio-communicative framework enabling the utterance is one premised on respect. Rather than stating outright something that may put an interlocutor in a socially-awkward position, the indirect utterance ultimately gives the inter-

locutor the prerogative to pursue the matter in explicit terms or in veiled terms, or not at all.

The proverb's analogical nature exemplifies the means by which indirection is attained. It is through semantic association and referential allusion that approximation of meaning is attained, and which ultimately becomes the means by which interlocutors can address socially precarious topics and evaluations.

The proverb that Ana uses presents an analogy that alludes to a socially sanctioned behavior. In this case, that hunger must be met by diligence to satisfy it – and that is what the siblings preparing the dinner table are exhibiting. The setting of the table parallels the act of stoking a fire since they are both acts of diligence that lead to the desired goal (i.e., consumption of the meal). The analogy is not voiced explicitly, but it is evidently implicit because the participants do not question the relevance of the proverb and, what is more, express agreement with Ana's use of it as a reply to Tita. It is in the participants' expression of agreement, and in Tita's acceptance of the proverb as a reply, that we see how the use of the proverb defuses the potential point of discord (i.e., an accusation) – and this is done without the participants ever directly mentioning the problem itself.

The chain of details involved in understanding Ana's utterance of a proverb is pointed out to emphasize that even the most common linguistic exchanges require our use of complex mental resources and socio-cultural competence. That is, if we add to those linguistic subtleties of intention (what a speaker meant to do by uttering something), allusion (implicit topical references), and convention (socially sanctioned patterns of expression), the equally subtle distinctions of cultural practices and culture-specific referents, the ability to understand messages fraught with these latter elements seems even more remote for the uninitiated – or the outsider. But before the particular aspects of some of the proverbs used by the López network become the focus of discussion, there are some basic concerns surroundings proverbs as a phenomenon to which we must attend.

3.2. Focusing the theoretical lens

That the proverbs used by the members of the López social network beg to be unpacked so that we can see the weight of their significance in terms of communicative efficiency and in terms of social capital exemplifies how proverbs, as well as other oral traditions, involve very complex issues in their apparently simple forms. It is a mistake to assume that simply because forms of expression are structurally simple or commonplace they aren't socially significant. Quite the contrary, the popularity that establishes them as commonplace attests to

their importance, for it is hard to imagine that an expression that is useless or ineffective would remain in circulation. So one question surrounding proverbs is why such a form of expression – that in the eye of many of our contemporaries seems antiquated – should persist in certain social circles. And another equally intriguing question is whether the same expressive form can be assumed to have the same social function across different discourse communities. The only way to answer these questions is by studying the discourse communities and their practices internally, with the goal of documenting the practices and hypothesizing their impact within a multicultural society.

With that notion in mind, the exploration of proverb use among members of an ethnic minority group in the United States garners importance on the basis of its focus on two dimensions of language use that are basic elements in any consideration of such socially momentous issues as education, identity formation, social empowerment, and intercultural respect. These two dimensions are communicative behavior and cognitive ability – the respective provinces of sociolinguistics and cognitive science, two disciplines that have been considered to be diametrically opposed by virtue of their philosophical positioning in relation to their object of study. The first is concerned with the examination of human behavior as it is grounded in particular language use and its context; whereas the latter looks to examine human thought processes and behavior by basing itself on the premise of universal brain functions.

Sociolinguists has as a basic guiding principle the idea that language and society are inextricably bound, which is to say that every society's linguistic behavior is a reflection or extension of that society's cultural underpinnings. Values and beliefs are codified and manifested in all aspects of linguistic communication, such as popular expressions, shared vocabulary, oral traditions, conversational rules and modes of interaction, and even linguistic modes of creativity. This guiding principle leads sociolinguists to consider that all cultures are linguistically distinct and unique in so far as their language use differs from that of other cultures. What is more, the link between language use and behavior suggests that considerable familiarity with the language functions of another culture are needed for an outsider to really grasp the meanings of another culture's sociocommunicative behavior.

In contrast, the cognitivists' guiding principle is that all human beings share a brain structure that functions similarly regardless of cultural influence. This leads cognitivists to examine how the human brain works in regard to thinking processes. By being linked to the physiological workings of the brain, thinking processes, including the capacity for language, may be said to be universal – or to put it another way, "innate" (see Sampson [2005] for a summary and alternative opinion to the innateness hypothesis). Thus the differences among

cultures, presumably, may be linguistically but not mentally based – an assumption that renders this type of difference as merely superficial, rather than essential, in nature. In contrast, sociolinguists – to whatever degree they support the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (which claims that the semantic and syntactic categories found within any language limit its speakers' perception of the world and reality [Whorf 1956]) – contend that language is not only a reflection of thoughts but also a conditioning force behind them. This assumption, clearly, contradicts the cognitivists' claim that mental processes function independently of particular linguistic phenomena.

This separation of the biological (and thus general) from the socio-cultural (and thus particular) is quite important in the field of education, and James Paul Gee has documented the same tension between those who would emphasize the developing of thinking skills without regard for complicating social factors and those who consider that the two are inseparable. Gee (2000) identifies the two factions as they manifested themselves in the area of literacy studies in the late 1990s:

> Cognitivism saw "higher order thinking" and "intelligence" as primarily the manipulation of "information" ("facts") using general ("logical") rules and principles. Fact and "logic," not affect, society and culture, were emphasized. For cognitivism, the digital computer stood as the great metaphor for what thought was: "information processing" (and computers process information based on its form/structure, not its meaning).
>
> For "social turn" movements[,] "networks" are a key metaphor: knowledge and meaning are seen as emerging from social practices or activities in which people, environments, tools, technologies, objects, words, acts, and symbols are all linked to ("networked" with) each other and dynamically interact with and on each other. (Gee 2000: 183–184)

The examination of proverbs allows the articulation of a synthesis of these two positions. My analysis of proverb use by the members of the López social network in Chicago and in their village of origin in Mexico's state of Michoacán indicates that the positions of the cognitivists and the sociolinguists/social constructionists are not mutually exclusive. In the processing of proverbs, the network members who are the focus of this research exhibited higher order thinking skills that are in line with the type of claims and observations that have been made by cognitive psychologists (e.g., Honeck 1997; Johnson-Laird 1988; Goodwin and Wenzel 1979) in regard to some of the thought processes involved in comprehension and understanding. However, the cultural underpinnings that united the members of the social network were also equally important in assigning meaning to the aphoristic expressions the network used (i.e., culture and language do affect how we think about something). The reconciliation of these theoretical

positions, then, frames the analysis of the use of proverbs by this social network that will be presented in the following chapters.

The analysis of contextualized proverbs exposes the complexities of language use, communicative strategies, and complex cognitive skills that are often ignored or thought lacking in marginal or subordinate ethnolinguistic groups in the U.S. (Valádez et al. 2000; Martínez 2000). Not only do the data presented here contradict this claim, but this type of data itself may also be seen as a means by which the linguistic and cognitive skills of ethnolinguistic minorities may be assessed in the classroom. In fact, several scholars (e.g., Kells et al. 2004; DeStigter 2001; Valdés 1996; Gutiérrez and McLaren 1995; Delpit 1995), particularly in the last ten years, have indicated that there is a need in the field of education for sociolinguistic research, and their own work has shown how teaching methods can be transformed for the better if educators are familiar with the values, traditions, and skills that students from traditionally under-represented social groups bring with them to mainstream classrooms.

The need for this kind of information seems crucial at all levels of education, but particularly at the stages of education where attendance is no longer compulsory for students. Many ethnic minority students welcome the first opportunity they have to leave the classroom that they have found so alienating in the course of their academic experience (DeStigter [2001] offers a moving account of how this happens on a day-to-day basis in the case of Latino students in a small town in Michigan). For those who continue their education, the prospects of finding a more hospitable educational experience are not promising. It is not uncommon, given my professional experience as a college-level composition instructor and as a Latino student, to find that cultural minority students have trouble reconciling their home culture with that of the academy (Ibarra 2001). Many cultural minority students find their home culture not only challenged but also practically displaced as they advance through their academic careers. Patricia Bizzell (1986) talks about these students as part of those who are often labeled "basic writers" in college-level composition courses and who are often seen – and see themselves – as the "most alien in the college community" (294).

In answering the question that serves as the title to her article, "What happens when basic writers come to college?," Bizzell considers that many "basic writers, upon entering the academic community, are being asked to learn a new dialect and new discourse conventions, but the outcome of such learning is acquisition of a whole new world view" (297). Since the world view that generally characterizes academia (e.g., individualism; critical thinking; formal logic; reliance on expertise and credentials; disdain for absolutism) may contrast with that of many traditional Mexican families (e.g., familism; reliance on tradition and faith; belief in universals; rigid gender-based differentiation within family and society),

it is vital for the success of future generations of Mexican-origin students – and those of other (ethno)linguistic minorities – that educators be informed about the conflicts that may surface as the traditionally under-represented student populations negotiate their acquisition of the academic world view. The acquisition of the latter may very well involve a tacit acceptance of the values of the dominant socio-cultural groups with which such a view is more closely aligned; moreover, it would entail the risk of losing the world view espoused at home if the two are considered incompatible. Alternatively, if academic success is seen as premised on the displacement of ethnic identity or other valued social ties, many ethnic minority students may find that to be too high a price to pay for the upward social mobility that is often promised as the reward for academic achievement. Instead of enticing them to fashion for themselves an identity that promotes academic success, the choice between upward social mobility or maintenance of ethnic values and social ties often leads the students faced with this dilemma to fashion an identity of resistance that ultimately perpetuates the stereotypes (academic disengagement, aggression, isolation, mistrust) against which they react (DeStigter 2001: 220–237).

Among the López social network the consequence of socio-cultural alienation in school is personified by Hilda, María and Aristeo's second-youngest daughter. Despite her fine features, fair skin, tawny hair, and complete bilingualism, Hilda attributes her disenchantment with schooling to an increasing cultural alienation that reached its peak after she completed high school. It was then that Hilda decided that school had very little to offer her, and she balked at the idea of going to college. In retrospect she admits that the alienation she felt in school was incremental and belied by the satisfactory marks she earned over the years. In school, and later at her workplace, Hilda was constantly reminded of her otherness – and mostly shunned because of it – when she chose to speak Spanish and embrace her Mexican ways with other Mexicans. The mainstream's rejection of her Mexican identity was so pernicious that, ironically, Hilda saw a college education as the road to assimilation and rejected it – her college-educated siblings' exhortations to the contrary not withstanding.

Given the concern with preserving the home culture while keeping in step with educational progress, the analysis of proverb-use that follows is founded on the premise that the understanding and inclusion of ethnically varied oral traditions in the classroom can make the latter more hospitable for traditionally under-represented socio-cultural groups. Oral traditions (e.g., narratives, ritual and figurative expressions, word-play) may be seen as particularly appropriate for addressing group identity concerns because they are a means by which communities engage in socially sanctioned genres of expression and communication. For example, Bauman (1986: 113) says that storytelling is a common means by

which people give their lived experience "cognitive and emotional coherence," construct and negotiate social identity, and invest "the experiential landscape with moral significance in a way that can be brought to bear on human behavior." Storytelling is only one of many oral traditions that serve this function. Part of what is argued here is that proverbs, like storytelling and other oral traditions, perform the same social functions Bauman lists.

Since members of any social group are persuaded to behave a certain way, or value certain things, by virtue of how their lived experience is portrayed and encapsulated, the oral genres valued by particular communities can be considered socially constructed indexes to their groups' behavioral codes. These oral traditions influence the way members of any given community think and, thus, how they perceive and feel about the world around them. In essence, the examination of such oral traditions can serve as a window into the workings of solidarity by revealing how a community makes sense and (re)affirms and (re)constructs those systems of meaning that hold it together. Knowledge of such systems is important for educators who are presented with the task and responsibility of carving out a niche for culturally diverse oral traditions in the classroom at a time when the manifestation of intolerance toward linguistic and cultural diversity (e.g., English-only movements, anti-immigrant sentiment and demonstrations across the country, and a resurgence in racial segregation [see Orfield and Lee 2004]) is patent.

Educators are called, and many times required, to fashion classrooms that truly mirror and value the multicultural reality of society at large. But even educators who acknowledge the respect of diversity as their duty and recognize the latent educational value such diversity promises may still have difficulty reconciling this aim with their mandate to have all students attain the mastery of conventional forms and cultural knowledge that is expected by the academic establishment. Kells et al. (2004) express this apparent frustration in the following way:

> We know. We know of the Latinos and Latinas in our classrooms. We know of their linguistic complexity, but we haven't yet found ways to translate this knowledge into classroom practices that aren't still founded on an assimilationist set of assumptions. Assimilation is psychological conquest. (Kells et al. 2004: 2)

In the same volume, Juan Guerra (2004) proposes the concept of "transcultural repositioning," which involves the ability to adapt socially and intellectually to the demands of particular social contexts. This ability allows individuals to navigate the multiple environments that are juxtaposed in an ever more complex and diverse society without entirely being confined to one position. In fact, the ability to "reposition" oneself seems to be premised on a multi-faceted socio-

linguistic repertoire that allows for the "shape shifting in cultural, linguistic, and intellectual terms" that Guerra mentions (15). This idea is similar to Judith Rodby's (1992) "dialectical" theory of language dynamics in regard to speakers of English as a second language and their acquisition of writing skills. Her theory proposes that "[t]he relationship among the writer, the mother-tongue, the English-language communities, and English itself is dynamic. Literacy is a human practice through which self, nation, community, and language are defined simultaneously, in a mutually dependent manner" (47–48). Such notions of the dynamics surrounding discourse and literacy tell us that educators concerned with serving ethnic minorities populations the U.S. need to be informed about the actual discursive practices that are common among particular groups in order to uncover ways of reconciling or relating those practices with those that are required in academic institutions.

To this purpose, the socio-cognitive examination of proverbs reveals that they are amazingly complex social, linguistic, and cognitive constructs. Their complexity is reflected in the way the members of the López social network strategically used proverbs to serve some sophisticated socio-communicative needs, such as supporting argumentative claims, giving advice, establishing rapport, and entertaining.

Because oral forms of expression take on culturally-specific functions that may often hinder successful inter-cultural communication, it is necessary to emphasize that what is culturally-specific is not necessarily the form itself but the use to which it is put and the allusions that it involves. We may consider this important distinction by noting that proverbs, as a linguistic genre, appear to be quite popular among the various cultures of humanity. Many, if not all, cultures appear to have linguistic expressions that act as proverbs. In addition, proverbs are known to be part of the most ancient texts in the history of the world. Paremiologist (proverb scholar) Herón Pérez Martínez (1993), supported by the information collected in an edited volume by James B. Pritchard (1950) on ancient Near Eastern texts, suggests that in ancient Egyptian texts (circa 2450 B.C.E.) we can begin to see "the germ" of some proverbs, such as, "Hold on to the truth and never let go"; "Good words are better hidden than the emerald"; and "Bad deeds never took their fruit to good port" (31–34). The historical presence of proverbs is underscored by the work of Samuel Noah Kramer (1989: 117–129), who documents not only that Sumerian clay tablets dating back to the third millennium B.C.E. contain some lists of proverbs, but that the concerns expressed in those ancient proverbs sound surprisingly familiar to modern ears. The ancients, as Kramer refers to them, reveal in their proverbs an awareness of the human condition and human flaws that make their distant voices ring with clarity, humor, wit, and insight. So much so, that he suggests that there is

a "universal relevance" in the content of proverbs; something that appears to be indicated by the following proverbs' commentary on social-class differences:

- The poor man is better dead than alive;
  If he has bread, he has no salt,
  If he has salt, he has no bread,
  If he has meat, he has no lamb,
  If he has lamb, he has no meat.
- Everybody takes to the well-dressed man.
- The poor man borrows and worries.
- Who possesses much silver, may be happy,
  Who possesses much barley, may be happy,
  But who has nothing at all, can sleep.

But the suggestion of universality on the basis of content is quickly undermined as he gives other examples that reveal how particular cultural attitudes inform general evaluations of the mundane – as in the case of dogs, which are characterized as troublesome and pesky in the Sumerian proverbs Kramer lists, rather than loyal, friendly, or useful:

- The ox plows, the dog spoils the deep furrows.
- It is a dog that does not know its own home.
- The smith's dog could not overturn the anvil; he [therefore] overturned the pot instead.

The "universal relevance" that Kramer senses is perhaps not so much that the content of the proverbs is so pertinent to us as it is that we still engage in the same socio-cognitive practice of rendering an understanding of human nature and natural environment in laconic figurative expressions. That some generalizations will translate across time and space is, in that sense, not terribly surprising because human beings are bound to be preoccupied with the essential concerns of living in society, making ends meet, and interacting with non-human creatures; but it is the practice of communicating an entire abstract argument by means of a concrete observation that compels us to recognize the value of proverbs as linguistic forms of expression that mark human creativity, mental agility and sophistication. What is more, the interest in paremiology is furthered by the claim that proverbs allude to values and lessons that often serve to reinforce cultural bonds. This is probably the main reason that proverbs continue to survive the tests of time and space. The evidence of their resilience may easily by seen in the fact that most people have no difficulty identifying proverbs, or even recalling some. But just as proverbs can be considered popular and easily identifiable, they

harbor a complexity that is reflected in the scholarly failure to reach a conclusive definition of what a proverb is.

3.3. The nature and characteristics of proverbs

Many scholars have proffered categorical definitions of the proverbial utterance, but none of those definitions has been accepted unanimously. Determining when an utterance may be understood as a proverb has been elusive because structural variation abounds among proverbial utterances. This, in turn, has complicated the taxonomic endeavor that would presumably make the pursuit of a definition easier. Here is an indication on the proliferation of names given to utterances that are proverbial in nature: apothegm, aphorism, adage, maxim, saying, and wellerism (with the latter being distinguished for its comical bent and quotative characteristics).[2] Perhaps the numerous names for roughly the same expressive phenomenon are more indicative of the social distinctions that tend to get attached to language use than to actual differences in the expressions they claim to identify. Pérez Martínez (1988) rejects the subtle distinctions implied by such proliferation in terminology on the grounds that they are prescriptive assessments of language – rather than definitions based on actual use of the expressions – that turn out to be misleading if accepted without question. As an example, he points to the distinction between *proverbio* and *refrán* made in the Spanish edition of Muller's *Herder Lexicon*. Although in contemporary Spanish the two terms can be used practically interchangeably, and the dictionary in question confirms that both are terms for pithy sayings, the term *proverbio* refers to a sententious expression (i.e., pithy, moralizing) of "cultured origin," whereas the term *refrán* refers to a sententious expression originating in "common usage." Pérez Martínez quickly points out that

> *este tipo de especificaciones ciertamente no bastan. En el refranero mexicano muchos "proverbios" se hicieron "de uso común" y el carácter "sentencioso" conviene a todo el género.*
> [these types of specifications are certainly not enough. In the Mexican corpus of proverbs many "proverbs" became "of common use" and the characteristic "sententiousness" befits the whole genre.] (Pérez Martínez 1988: 29)

Pérez Martínez alerts us in this way to pedantic assertions that serve primarily to reify class distinctions and to complicate unnecessarily the classification of these expressions. This serves to illustrate just one of the pitfalls involved in the pursuit

2 These are exceeded in Spanish by three more terms: *refranes*, *dicharachos*, and *sentencias*, according to Pérez Martínez (1988).

of a universal definition of the proverb, and it shows what commonly happens when proverbs are reduced to their basic components in order to generalize about them: either their particular qualities seem to get lost in the conceptual and rhetorical pruning, or their definition takes on such breadth that it becomes unwieldy.[3]

Nevertheless, one quintessential characteristic of proverbs is that they serve a comparative function between what appear to be at least two initially unrelated referents. The initial incongruence often serves to direct the listeners to make a mental effort to glean a message from the utterance, which forces them to engage the higher order thinking skills that are required for the processing of implicit messages. In other words, the apparent incongruence between the context and the utterance alerts the listener to the potential use of a proverb, which in turn, requires another type of cognitive processing than that required by the conventional literal utterance. The cognitive skills involved in the type of processing required by figurative expressions such as proverbs are commonly referred to as higher-order thinking skills because they involve the management of more variables in the construction of meaning and a greater sophistication in their correlation. Some such skills, which will be addressed later in the analysis of proverbs that members of the López social network actually used, are (1) abstract reasoning, (2) reconfiguration of symbols, (3) metalinguistic awareness, and (4) metacognition. Recognizing the specialized thinking required in the processing of figurative expressions and the particular functions certain genres serve in different societies allows us to localize the interface of cognition and language by showing us how we combine the reasoning skills we are born with (i.e., the ability to infer, compare, and generalize) and the acquired social skills that tell us when, how, and to what we should apply our intellectual wherewithal. Given the advances in cognitive science, the mapping of this interface holds much promise for contemporary studies in the sociology of language and discourse studies.

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3 Honeck (1997) illustrates this point by synthesizing the many characteristics other scholars have attributed to proverbs in the following definition: "A discourse deviant, relatively concrete, present (non-past) tense statement that uses characteristic linguistic markers to arouse cognitive ideals that serve to categorize topics in order to make a pragmatic point about them" (18).

3.4. The shape of proverbs and the social construction of meaning

Although in terms of structure, proverbs can be said to be very similar to riddles (Dundes 1981), the form of proverbial expressions can vary enough to create numerous exceptions to just about any definition that seeks to encapsulate them. Dundes (1981) and Ohtsuki (1989) have identified that any proverbial expression requires a minimum of two words (e.g., "money talks"; "time flies"; "noblesse oblige"), but the same cannot be said about a maximum number of words – even though the collective understanding is that proverbial expressions are to be brief sententious phrases. Ohtsuki (1989) defines the proverb through negation: proverbs are not made up of only one word; their meaning is not the literal semantic message of their individual words; they cannot be modified by addition or subtraction of lexemes or syntactic order; and their authorship is not known. This leaves plenty of room for considerable variation in syntagmatic, semantic, and poetic aspects of proverbs. The potential for variation multiplies in relation to the number of languages taken into account when defining the proverb structurally.

Dundes (1981: 60–61), for example, admits that his structural definition of the proverb is tentative because it relies only on Anglo-American proverb data. He is aware that structural variation of proverbs across languages can affect his definition. This is to say that what may serve as a proverb in one language may be unrecognizable as such in another simply because structural parameters differ. For example, the phrase "live and learn" may be seen as a proverb in English-speaking cultures because an implied actor or subject is tacitly attached to the phrase, but minimal pairs may not be recognized as complete proverbial units in other languages that require either an explicit subject or an enclitic pronoun that marks the passive voice, as seen in the Spanish equivalent to the above phrase: *se vive y se aprende* ([it is] lived and [it is] learned). The English expression's literal equivalent in the active voice, *vive y aprende* (live and learn), is not recognized in Spanish as the indicative mood in which most proverbs are cast but as the imperative mood. The enclitic pronoun of the first construction serves to communicate this distinction, which qualifies the phrase *se vive y se aprende* as a proverb but not so for its quasi-synonymous *vive y aprende*.

The difficulty of pinning down this common, yet taxonomically elusive, expression is further illustrated by Dundes' definition of the proverb as "a traditional propositional statement consisting of at least one descriptive element... consisting of a topic and a comment [... which] means that proverbs must have at least two words" (1981: 60). Dundes then elaborates on the nature of the relationship between the components of the "descriptive element" (i.e., the

topic and the comment), but when he asserts that proverbs with a single descriptive element are non-oppositional, and proverbs with more than one descriptive element may or may not be oppositional, we understand that his definition is going too far afield to express something that is practically self evident (i.e., expressions with only one referent will not communicate a contrast because there is only one element to consider, and expressions with more than one referent will identify a relationship – oppositional or non-oppositional – between those referents). This definition is consequently not very useful in helping us identify proverbs from non-proverbs because it can lead us to countless expressions in the different languages of the world that are made up of at least two words, one of which refers to a topic and the other comments on it, but which are NOT proverbs. For example, following Dundes' definition, the phrase "life is complicated" is a descriptive element consisting of a topic (living) and a comment (its degree of simplicity); since there are no two things being compared in the expression, it is non-oppositional in nature. But having identified this, the question remains whether the phrase is a proverb or not, and, if we reply in the negative, a related question is why a similar structural phrase, such as "life is short," can be understood as a proverb.

The key to solving this problem might be that for an utterance to be considered proverbial it must be meant figuratively instead of literally. We find this aspect included in Ohtsuki's (1989) definition of proverbs. For Ohtsuki, proverbs are expressions that consist of more than one word, and whose meaning is not the total of their elements, cannot be modified by addition or subtraction of lexemes or word order, and whose authorship is anonymous. With this definition, Ohtsuki covers the major aspects of proverbial expressions: they must be figurative phrases that are fixed in form and are the product of a social group's collective sensibilities. This means that figurativeness is a foundational aspect of proverbs, and it is in the collective sensibility that something's figurative aspect is constructed; in the absence of a shared analogical construct, an intelligible utterance is understood literally by default.

Silverman-Weinreich's (1981) work on proverbs supports this claim. In her examination of Yiddish proverbs Silverman-Weinreich identifies several syntactic, semantic, and prosodic markers that are clearly not exclusive features of Yiddish proverbs:

> Every Yiddish proverb . . . seems to have at least two grammatical markers (nomic verb and generic or abstract subject), one distinctive semantic feature (metaphor, paradox, sharp or surprising contrasts), and generally at least one phonic device as well (rhyme, assonance, consonance, alliteration, meter). (Silverman-Weinreich 1981: 80)

As the following examples illustrate, English and Spanish proverbs share many of the features Silverman-Weinreich (1981) identifies in Yiddish proverbs. The grammatical subject in many English and Spanish proverbial expressions is often generic or abstract, and the verb is never cast in the past tense, as Honeck (1997) points out, presumably "because such usage almost always particularizes an utterance and robs it of its omnitemporal and polysituational potential" (14). The presence of a distinctive semantic feature such as the use of metaphor, irony, and/or thematic allusion also applies to many English and Spanish proverbs. Finally, most English and Spanish proverbs are characterized by equally distinctive acoustic and prosodic features such as rhyme, assonance, alliteration, meter, repetition, and parallelism. For instance, the proverb "fair in the cradle, foul in the saddle" displays most of these prosodic features. In its phrasal juxtaposition, it reveals syntactic parallelism (an adjective followed by prepositional phrase) and semantic antagonism (pure/base; attractive/repulsive; young/mature) on the basis of metonymy. The phrases begin with the phone [f] which gives the phrases a sense of alliteration. Additionally, the phrasal repetition is not only marked by the identical preposition and the article which follows it but by the phrases' prosodic meter (five syllables divided into two feet: the first a dactyl – a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed; and the second a trochee – a stressed syllable followed by one unstressed). Here are a few more examples of these prosodic features in other English and Spanish proverbs:

– a friend in need is a friend in deed (repetition and rhyme)
– brain beats brawn (alliteration)
– as you reap, so shall you sow (semantic parallelism)
– man proposes, but God disposes (semantic parallelism and rhyme)
– sharply bargained, honestly paid[4] (trochaic tetrameter)
– *el que mal empieza, mal acaba* (semantic parallelism)
  [he who begins badly, ends badly]
– *dime con quién andas, y te diré quién eres* (assonance)
  [tell me who you're with, and I'll tell you who you are]
– *candíl de la calle, oscuridad de su casa* (semantic/syntactic parallelism)
  [(oil) lamp of the street, darkness of his/her home]
– *del plato a la boca, se cae la sopa* (rhyme)
  [from the plate to the mouth, the soup spills]

4 Although the verbs in this proverb are cast in the past tense, the text itself is an elliptical rendering of the phrase: [What is] sharply bargained [is] honestly paid. The omitted copula confirms the present tense that marks the expression as a proverb.

Thus, it is clear that Silverman-Weinreich (1981) makes some observations that narrow the breadth of the significant formal features that characterize many proverbs, and this observation brings us closer to a classification and definition of proverbs in general.

However, in terms of structural features, there is still another aspect relating to the structure of proverbial expressions: their accompanying communicative features. Briggs (1985, 1988) has pointed out that there are communicative features that regularly accompany proverb use in the community of New Mexico *mexicanos* he researched. He identified eight factors that characterized proverb use within that community:

1. Tying phrase (utterance that links the preceding utterances to the proverbial text that is to follow)
2. Identity of "owner" (the person, if any, to whom the proverb to be uttered is attributed)
3. Quotative aspect (used if the proverb is attributed to a particular person or group of people)
4. Proverb text (the proverb itself)
5. Special association (statement of the provenance of the proverb, if known)
6. General meaning and/or hypothetical situation (overt explanation and/or application of the proverb)
7. Relevance to context (overt connection to the context in which the proverb is uttered)
8. Validation (speaker and audience may affirm the validity of the proverb by saying something such as "it's true")

Briggs considers these features a part of the proverb performance even though they might not always be used. He says that the presence of any feature aside from the proverb text is part of the negotiation process involved in communication (i.e., contextualization); the speaker makes use of a specific feature if it is required for his/her purposes or by the audience. Thus, Briggs' method takes into account cultural idiosyncrasies, which is to say that he documents specific ways that a community makes use of proverbs and the meanings it attributes to them, and in this way Briggs links practice with meaning. This contrasts with the presentation of proverbs out of context (such as in proverb dictionaries) in that the evidence for proverb meaning and use is anchored in actual empirical data rather than in generalizations based on purported structural features and/or other *a priori* expectations.

The focus on shared social behavior (the setting of proverb performance, and the participants within it), background knowledge (the references to particular people, places, and historical events), and linguistic features that accompany a

verbal genre such as the proverb, allow us to see how particular communities use language, and how this use of language varies cross-culturally. In recognizing that the form of the genre may vary across communities, we are led to consider how meaning is assigned to a proverb – or how a proverb comes to be understood – in different communities.

The works of Seitel (1981) and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1981) indicate that there is a "deep structure" to proverb meaning; that is, there is one basic way that proverbs function. That deep structure can take different guises once it is combined with sociolinguistic features like the ones Briggs mentions. Seitel (1981) and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1981) address the issue of proverb meaning from a cognitivist approach and a rhetorical approach, respectively.

Seitel proposes that the process by which we understand proverbs is one based on comparative thinking. The proverb, he argues, is basically an analogy that we come to understand by engaging in analogical reasoning and recognizing symbolic associations. The quoting of a proverb, Seitel considers, is basically the presentation of an analogy; so that when speaker X says to listener Y, "A stitch in time saves nine," in reference to minor automobile repair before a long trip, X is in fact saying, "A [a stitch in time] is to B [saving nine] as C [making a minor car repair] is to D [preventing a major one]" (or A:B :: C:D). The addresser and addressee must attend to two mental domains, the particular and the general, to which Seitel refers as the "proverb situation" and the "social situation" respectively, in order to understand the comparison (126–128). By "social **situation**," however, Seitel does not mean the actual social context in which the proverb is uttered but the abstract domain of social norms and associations that parallel the particular imaginary referents mentioned in the proverb text. To refer to the social factors (e.g., age, gender, social status, intention, etc.) surrounding and characterizing the interlocutors and their use of proverbs, Seitel uses the term "social **context**" (126). Given these distinctions, Seitel further observes that the referents of the proverb text are ascribed "culturally defined features" which inform the relationship between the "proverb situation" and the "social situation" (i.e., the relationship between the concrete proverb referents and the abstract situational referents) (135–136). That is to say that the referents in a proverb are invested with culturally-specific associations, and these associations are the foundation of the meaning embedded in the proverbial analogy. Similarly, the "social context" is informed by the "culturally defined features" which characterize the participants and their interaction (136).

Finally, of the potential for the varied uses and understandings of a given proverb, Seitel considers that the explicit and implicit pronouns used in the casting of the proverb, clarify how the proverb is meant to be understood. For example, if a person in need runs to a benefactor and begins to communicate

the reason for being there by saying, "A toad does not run in the daytime unless something is after its life," the proverb is understood as self-disparaging because the speaker is identified as the one with the urgent need, and the proverb is thus implicitly cast in the first person; but if the speaker of the proverb is the benefactor who utters the proverb upon seeing the person in need arrive, then the proverb is understood as an insult because the visitor is understood to be the object of the proverb, and the proverb is thus implicitly cast in the second person (129).

Seitel's theory accounts well for the cognitive component in the processing of proverbs, but the idea that situational meaning is founded on speaker attribution (by virtue of intimated pronouns) is not completely convincing because we can think of proverbs wherein no immediate component can be ascribed to particular interlocutors (e.g., time is money; war is war), and this clearly undermines Seitel's claim. Nevertheless, the notion of a "social context" being juxtaposed to a "social situation" – in keeping with Seitel's terms – in regard to proverb processing is fruitful because it redirects us to the importance of cultural factors in the construction of non-literal meaning.

That multiple meanings can be gleaned from the same proverb in the same conversation (e.g., the proverb "a rolling stone gathers no moss" is understood in Scotland as an exhortation toward activity, whereas in England it is an affirmation of the rewards of stability) indicates that meaning-making is not as straightforward as Seitel's claim of proverb's analogical structure would suggest. Instead, Seitel's consideration of the multiple-meanings feature is better addressed by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1981) socio-rhetorical approach, which demonstrates the complexity of interpersonal communication.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett proposes that proverbs have no "base meaning." That is, proverbs do not have one meaning in and of themselves but are, instead, assigned a meaning in conversation by virtue of the exigencies of the interlocutors and their conversational situations. To put it another way, in addition to its potential analogical meaning(s), the understanding of a proverb is conditioned by the social context of the interlocutors. She presents the proverb "a friend in need is a friend indeed" as an example of one that is commonly interpreted in different ways because of socio-rhetorical factors such as:

1. syntactic ambiguity (is your friend in need or are you in need);
2. lexical ambiguity (indeed or in deed):
3. key (Is the proverb being stated "straight" or "sarcastically"? Does "a friend indeed" mean "a true friend" or "not a true friend"?)
   (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1981: 114)

Thus Seitel's and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's contributions to paremiology further the notion that cognitive studies and sociolinguistic studies must be synthesized in order to provide a holistic understanding of linguistic communication. Moreover, their work indicates that in our understanding of proverb use, we are forced to acknowledge, rather than ignore, that proverb use is executed by speakers who seek to "do" something with those proverbs; that is to say that there is social agency behind these linguistic expressions, and that it is this agency that gives them meaning. Combining the idea that "proverbs express relative rather than absolute truth" (i.e., there is no "base meaning") with the observation that situations can be evaluated in more than one way, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has found a way to account for the multiplicity of meanings – and hence function – assigned to proverbs. Furthermore, if we consider that personal aim (i.e., intention) is an essential component of any linguistic communicative context, it follows that context determines – not only influences – the meanings assigned to proverbs. When we consider the functions that such forms of expression serve for the particular social groups who commonly employ them, cognitive and socio-cultural processes cannot be treated as mutually independent factors in the construction of meaning.

3.5. The similarity of proverbs to other verbal art: The case of riddles and jokes

When speaking of structure and definition, it is often helpful to see the similarities and differences between that which is the object of study and something akin to it. Following this notion, the study of proverbs directs us to the examination of similar genres. I consider two genres that seem closely related to proverbs: riddles and jokes.

Pepicello and Green (1984), when speaking about the characteristics of riddles, say that riddles take performance[5] as their contextual frame, "as opposed to the normal communicative frame in utilitarian speech. The latter is highly contextualized, and its goal is to facilitate the flow of information; the former [i.e., riddler's performative speech] suspends normal context, and its goal is to impede the flow of information for the purpose of outwitting the riddlee" (5).

5 Bauman (1977) begins to detail the idea of a "performative frame," and Bauman (1986) defines "performance as a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content" (3).

Similarly, although the intention behind proverb use is not to outwit the listener, this often happens when people who are not accustomed to hearing proverbs happen to overhear one or have one addressed to them. The confusion ensues as the result of the aspect of minimal information transfer that is part of the nature of the proverb (i.e., by consensus, the proverb is understood to be a pithy and implicit comparison, instead of a detailed explanation). Dundes (1981) quotes the following example by Russian folklorist Iurii Sokolov to show the similarity of structure between proverbs and riddles, and the ease with which one genre may take the guise of the other:

> "Nothing hurts, but it groans all the time." If the text is used as a proverb, it refers to a hypocrite and a beggar. If used as a riddle, it refers to a swine. Sokolov is incorrect, however, when he contends it is only by means of a single change of intonation that a proverb is transformed into a riddle. It is obviously not intonation per se which is the crucial factor. Instead, it is the context in which the text is cited. If the text is being used to refer to a hypocrite known to both the speaker and the audience, the text functions as a proverb. If the speaker wishes to test an addressee, then he may state the text as a question using an appropriate interrogatory intonation pattern. The context or rhetorical intention of the speaker determines the intonation pattern *and* the genre distinction. The intonation is a concomitant feature, a signal or indicator of the genre, but hardly a "cause" of the genre. (Dundes 1981: 51; emphasis added)

The key observation here in regard to the work of Dundes (1981) and that of Pepicello and Green (1984) is that riddles – and perhaps most instances of verbal art (i.e., those instances not exclusively serving the function of reportage) – are highly contextualized[6] and suspend normative or prescriptive considerations of context. Proverbs, like riddles and jokes, force us to shift from the conventional way of processing the immediate and particular to an alternate mode that takes into account the distant and the general as well. This is what makes these genres engaging and entertaining for most people.

Jokes, like riddles and proverbs, withhold crucial information – the "punch line." Jokes rely on the cultural, linguistic, and social conventions we use contin-

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6 The notion of "rhetorical intention" exemplifies that context is constructed in situ (see my discussion of context and contextualization later in this chapter), and this means that performative instances of verbal art are rooted in their context (e.g., time, place, history, norms of interaction, participants, participants' status, participants' intentions, etc.) for their particular message. The performance can be readily taken out of its context (i.e., "entextualized" according to Bauman and Briggs [1990]) and recontextualized either by reporting or re-performing the instance of verbal art, but this act will in itself involve another context and, by extension, another meaning than the first.

uously to make sense of our world in order to get us thinking in the conventional mode; once that is achieved, a good joke reveals that there is a parallel interpretation that we have ignored in regard to the joke's referent. It is in the revelation of this misdirection that we find the humor of a joke, according to one major camp in humor theory (Keith-Spiegel 1972: 7–12).[7] Often, the more pertinent the punch line is to the leading information of the otherwise expected outcome, the funnier we consider the joke. The point here is that in order to recognize the humor of a joke, we have to be familiar with the conventional, cultural, and linguistic standards and modes of thinking that are subverted by the joke (Apte 1985: 16–17). Just as we have to be familiar with the elements that are related to the clues given to us in order to solve a riddle, in the case of proverbs we have to be familiar with the cultural, linguistic, and real-world allusions and associations encapsulated in the analogies of proverbs in order to understand what proverbs mean. In addition, we have to bear in mind that speaker intention, as demonstrated succinctly by Sokolov's example, plays a great role in determining meaning and function of such oral genres as the proverb and riddle. In fact, this forces us to consider how dependent the meaning of an utterance – particularly a figurative one – is on its context, and it is with this mind that the analyses of situated proverbs presented in the next chapter take into account the cultural, linguistic, personal, and temporal factors surrounding the utterance of proverbs in order to determine the latter's socio-communicative functions within the López social network.

3.6. Studying proverb use in context

Studying discursive practices without taking into account the social contexts that render them intelligible is currently unthinkable, and we owe this methodological insight in great part to the theoretical framework of the ethnography of communication, as outlined by Hymes (1974), which requires that the researcher pay attention to message form, message content, setting, scene, speaker, addressee, key (i.e., "the tone, manner, or spirit in which an act is done"), norms of interaction, and norms of interpretation, among several other factors (54–64). By examining these aspects of contextualized language use, my study of proverbs

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7 As there are different types of humor and theories relating to its nature, here I consider the jokes that would fall under Freud's (1916) distinction of the *comic*, in which pleasure is "due to economy in the expenditure of **thought**" (emphasis added) – as opposed to *wit* (in which pleasure is derived from "economy in the expenditure of inhibition") and *humor* (in which "there is an economy in the expenditure of feeling") (as quoted in Keith-Spiegel 1972: 13).

examines how culture is manifested and (re)created on an on-going basis among the López social network. While gathering data, I generally did not engage in outright interviews or direct questioning of the participants about their proverb use. The few times that I did ask network members why they had used a proverb to express an idea, the answers I received were either evasive (e.g., "oh, I don't know"; "it just came to me"; "we do it all the time") or fruitless (e.g., "*es un forma de platicar*" [it's a way of talking]; "*es costumbre*" [it's a custom]; "*así decía mi mama*" [my mother used to say that]). I found that the other members of the social network simply were not inclined to analyze their use of proverbs – they simply used them. The few members who were inclined to contribute information about proverbs and their use directed me to collections of proverbs, and one member went so far as to give me a short pamphlet that listed common aphoristic expressions in Spanish.

This response from the network solidified my initial choice to conduct the collection of data through participant observation and introspection. Preference for this method stems from the commonly accepted belief that the less obtrusive the form of data gathering, the less compromised the linguistic data collected. That is, I wanted to gather quotidian instances of proverb use among the social network, and in order to get "natural" linguistic practices I did not want to make them so self-conscious about the way they spoke that it would alter those "natural" practices. To phrase it succinctly, I wanted to avoid what famed linguist William Labov calls the observer's paradox, whereby self-awareness of being observed leads participants in a study to feel obliged to give the researcher what they think the researcher wants to hear or see in terms of their behavior.

In order to get around this problem, much of the tape recording went on when the members of the social network were more than four – a condition that contributed to conversation and sometimes *relajo*,[8] which is a particular form of teasing and joking that is well identified by Mexicans themselves as a Mexican socio-communicative pastime. Thus, the data collected and the time spent collecting it were often accompanied by displays of wit, humor, and a general sense of pleasure derived from engaging in conversation. The lapsing into what was recognized as common and unaffected modes of casual discourse indicated that the intrusiveness of the tape recorder was effectively diminished within a few sessions of my initial fieldwork. With that auspicious beginning, I went on to collect data for nearly ten months between 1997 and 1998 in both setting of the social network's two migratory poles.

After tape recording instances of proverb use, I transcribed the pertinent stretches of discourse and paid close attention to the particularities of the indi-

8 See Farr (1994) for an analytical treatment of this practice.

viduals who used the proverbs, how the proverbs were used, why they were used in particular circumstances, and what the outcome of their use was. This detailed analysis was informed by the general principles found in the field of discourse analysis, and in particular, the concerns of one of the subfields of linguistics: pragmatics.

The consideration of pragmatics was crucial for the analysis of spoken contextualized language because this framework offers analytical principles that allow for the consideration of context, reference, inference, and implicature – all elements that proved to be essential factors in the attribution of meaning to particular proverbs as they were used. In addition, since an examination of *context* is integral to my analysis of the data, a word on my understanding of this concept is in order.

The conception of *context* that I employ here is that discussed by Bauman and Briggs (1990) as *contextualization*. Bauman and Briggs point out that inclusiveness and false objectivity have come to be two problems accompanying the concept of *context* because its scope has extended so much that a consideration of all of its components in the analysis of any instance of discourse is impracticable (68). As an example, Bauman and Briggs (1990) mention that Bauman (1983b) lists the following elements as constitutive of context: "context of meaning," "institutional context," "context of communicative system," "social base," "individual context," and "context of situation." In addition to this overwhelming inclusiveness, Bauman and Briggs (1990) say that "positivistic definitions construe context as a set of discourse-external conditions that exist prior to and independently of the [discourse] performance" (68). In response to these problems with the term *context*, the term *contextualization* emphasizes that "communicative contexts are not dictated by the social and physical environment but emerge in negotiations between participants in social interactions. The ongoing contextualization process can be discerned by attending to the 'contextualization cues' that signal which features of the settings are used by interactants in producing interpretive frameworks" (68).

Correspondingly, my discussion of context is based on the idea that context is continuously negotiated, and that by attending to the contextualization cues (i.e., the factors to which participants must pay attention, have knowledge of, and to which they react in the process of drawing a particular understanding of any message) the researcher can analyze the factors that evidently play a role in communication, rather than those that would be expected to play a role.

Given these considerations, an ethnolinguistically-informed discourse analysis proved to be the best suited analytical framework for examining how language is used in varied forms and, sometimes, in contrasting ways across socio-cultural groups. In order to examine those differences in detail and to present general

reasons for those differences, I looked at the factors that constrained and/or legitimized the linguistic communicative strategies used within my research group, and pragmatics allowed me to take into account the factors surrounding utterances that give the latter particular meanings as opposed to constant and universal ones.

That is to say that pragmatics enabled a discussion of those aspects of language that are not determined and encapsulated in the linguistic form of utterances. For example, the utterance "Jane was just leaving" may communicate different things to different people in different contexts, but in purely semantic and literal terms it could be argued that there is only one (constant) meaning. However, our daily use and experience with language tells us otherwise. We can imagine that if the subject of the utterance "Jane was just leaving" is also the target of a stern gaze by the speaker of the utterance, the intention of the utterance is not merely to announce a fact but rather to bring about Jane's departure. On the other hand, if Jane is in the process of gathering her belongings as a third interlocutor approaches her and the speaker of the utterance, and the latter then comments that "Jane was just leaving" (and there is no extraordinary pitch, stress, and or gesture accompanying the utterance), we could conclude that the utterance was simply intended as a statement of fact. How do we recognize the differences in meaning for the utterance that is structurally the same? We turn to the elements studied in pragmatics (e.g., convention, situation, tone, manner, gestures) for answers.

In addition to the simple changes in context described above for this sample utterance, we would have to keep in mind that there are more complex elements involved in linguistic communication, such as inference, reference, and intention among others. In brief, and in keeping with this example, these other elements enable an explanation of how we come to reach conclusions based on shared contextual knowledge: We *infer* that the gathering of one's possessions is generally followed by taking leave; that the person *referred* to is in fact "Jane"; and we attend to all the details surrounding the utterance to ascertain whether the speaker's *intention* is to either announce that Jane is leaving of her own free will or to pressure her to leave. Context is thus crucial for an understanding of the meaning of particular utterances, and pragmatics provides the tools that enable the analysis of context.

The example I have provided demonstrates the type of discourse analysis to which I submit the López's proverbs in the rest of the book. As can be seen from the example, linguistic expressions can be multifaceted, complex, and culturally bound. Proverbs, in particular, share the prominent characteristic of indirectness that is manifested in the second meaning of the example above. If we consider that Jane is indirectly being pressured to leave, we might conclude

that the utterance's indirectness signals a particular "politeness" on the part of the speaker. The fact that this way of speaking signals particular social values through indirectness alerts us to the manifestation, reflection, and (re)creation of cultural patterns in language use.

This brings us to a question that applies to cross-cultural communication and which is of general concern in this book: How do people with different cultural and sociolinguistic backgrounds come to negotiate meaning that is so deeply embedded in shared contextual knowledge, familiarity with social and linguistic conventions, and particular cognitive patterns? And particular to the topic considered here are the questions: What differences exist across U.S. and Mexican oral traditions? How can these differences be reconciled or bridged? What do non-monolingual students stand to gain from retaining the oral traditions tied to their first language(s)? In what ways can these traditions be incorporated into their academic education? What cognitive skills are called upon in the mental processing of particular oral traditions such as the proverb? Is the transfer of these particular skills possible from the oral to the written domain?

As can be seen from the latter questions, a pragmatics-based analysis of this type of linguistic data serves not only the questions of socio-cultural identity and language use that are crucial for advancing a multicultural pedagogical philosophy, but it also serves as a methodological nexus that highlights the connection of discourse analysis to education. To be more precise, and in keeping with my concerns, literacy research is served by the work done in discourse analysis because both are essentially concerned with the function and manipulation of language in its figurative and literal modes to express thought – and perhaps further it.

Chapter 4
Proverbs do more than they mean[1]

4.1. Proverbs as discursive tools

Carmela and Hector Cabrera are retired school teachers. They grew up in Janácuaro, but they have lived most of their adult lives in its neighboring city, Villa Mújica. Their home there is not modest by local standards. It boasts of three bedrooms, one and half bathrooms, and a garage; the living-room faces the street, and people so often casually peer in through the front windows as they walk by that Carmela and Hector no longer even notice or bother, for that matter, to draw the curtains shut. On this warm Saturday afternoon, there is no need for air-conditioning, as the plaster-covered brick walls keep the interior cool, and the abundant foliage of the region cools the air enough to make the ambient temperature pleasant in the shade.

In one of the flanks of the house's sunken living-room there is a plush green velour sofa that is comfortable and familiar to Ana López and her husband Gabriel. The couple makes a stop in Janácuaro and its vicinity practically every year during summer vacation in order to visit Ana's relatives. Carmela and Hector are Ana's aunt and uncle, and when their niece and nephew-in-law are in town, they don't squander the opportunity to satisfy their curiosity about how things work in the U.S. They sometimes ask questions about civic duties and the logistics of the everyday, but mostly they ask about the school system; a topic that is all too familiar to the four interlocutors who have made a career out of teaching grade-school.

Hector, who has never been to the U.S., reveals his incredulity when he persistently asks if Gabriel imparts his lessons in English. Gabriel assures him that he does, and although Hector nods, there is a trace of doubt in his squinting eyes. The very idea that someone could master two languages, especially one as difficult as English, seems to Hector to be something extraordinary, and he clearly has a desire to see his nephew in action, although he refuses time and time again to visit the U.S., presumably on the basis of patriotic principle.

Carmela is less skeptical, though no less inquisitive, and her curiosity will eventually prove stronger than her fear of flying, leading her to visit her relatives

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1 This chapter includes revised sections from Domínguez Barajas (2005).

in Chicago. But for now, the four of them continue their conversation in the pistachio-colored house that sits near the center of town.

Like most people from Janácuaro, the members of the López social network use proverbs often in their conversations. This practice has a long tradition in Mexico, as knowledge and use of proverbs has traditionally been seen as evidence of sharp wit, facility of expression, and adherence to traditional values. John Steinbeck captured this discursive practice in his script for the film *Viva Zapata!* which was ultimately brought to the screen by director Elia Kazan and producer D. F. Zanuck in 1952. Although the film is not an original product of Mexican cinema, which was at that time in its golden age, Steinbeck's sympathetic treatment of the heroic figure, the mostly faithful tracing of the historical facts, and the inclusion of genuine songs, local customs and attire makes it seem as though it could have been.

What is more, Steinbeck appears to have translated actual Spanish proverbs instead of using their English equivalents, which makes the scene depicting the use of proverbs to gauge social affinities that much more plausible and contextually appealing. For instance, one of the proverbs uttered in the film comments on the link between a man's garments and the treatment he receives. The proverb as stated in the film seems more akin to the common rhyming Spanish proverb, *Conforme ven el traje, tratan al paje* [as they see the outfit, they treat the page] than to its English equivalent, It is the clothes that make the man. Similarly, rather than use the English proverb, One can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, the film uses a literal translation of the popular Spanish proverb, *Aunque la mona se vista de seda, mona se queda* [Even if the ape dresses in silk, she remains an ape]. Finally, the Zapata character makes one out of two separate Spanish proverbs when he says, "I believe that a man is fire, and a woman fuel, and she who is born beautiful, is born married." Those common proverbs are *El hombre es fuego, la mujer estopa, viene el diablo y sopla* [Man is fire, woman kindling, the devil comes and fans], and *A la mujer bella y honesta, casarse poco le cuesta* [To the beautiful and honest woman, getting married is of little effort].

The scene in question presents the Mexican revolutionary hero, Emiliano Zapata, as a gentleman caller who has been rejected previously as a suitor for Josefa, the daughter of a well-to-do merchant. After laying claim to fame as an exceptional general of the revolutionary army, Zapata returns to ask for Josefa's hand. Thus, the fictional Zapata finds himself sitting in the wealthy family's parlor with his sweetheart, her nursemaid, her mother, her father, and even – apparently – her grandmother.

Indicating the importance of propriety in the delicate matter of courtship, Josefa's mother sits conspicuously between her daughter and the suitor. She acts

as a physical barrier and as a discursive filter by prompting Josefa's utterances with nods and gestures.

Zapata is depicted initially as being out of his element when he asks Josefa directly if she has missed him. The women appear taken aback by his brazenness, and Josefa deftly redirects the conversation to take the more indirect route characteristic of good manners by saying, "It is said 'A warrior's shield is his sweetheart's heart.'" He, in turn, is befuddled by the response, so Josefa, rather than explain and defeat the purpose of testing his wit and social compatibility, simply adds another proverb, but identifies it as such: "We have a proverb, 'A man well-dressed is a man well thought of.'" This time Zapata doesn't disappoint and responds in kind, "A monkey in silk is still a monkey," which earns him what could be seen as an ironic nod of approval from his future father-in-law. He furthers his cause by uttering a compliment in proverbial form, "When love and beauty come into the house, then throw out the lamp!"

Josefa then tests his biases by asking if he agrees with the saying, "A horse unrode, an egg unbroke, a girl unwed," to which he replies, "I believe that a man is fire and a woman fuel, and she who is born beautiful is born married." The women smile approvingly, but Zapata, growing impatient with the obliqueness of the dialogue, and in keeping with his characterization as a man of action and forthrightness, asks Josefa if they can go for a walk. The women frown at the suggestion, and Zapata resignedly says, "A whipped dog is a wiser dog," which earns him yet another approving nod from his future father-in-law.

What is important about the scene it that it shows how Zapata's proverbs expand and affirm the values expressed by his sweetheart. The relevance and harmony of his proverbs in relation to those of Josefa win him the approval of his would-be in-laws. The film thus depicts how proverbs are used to communicate and make manifest points of solidarity for the interlocutors.

Within the confines of the pistachio-colored house near downtown Villa Mújica, a similar exchange of proverbial repertoires took place during Ana and Gabriel's visit. Despite Carmela and Ana's blood ties, there stood noticeable gaps between the two couples in terms of generation, place of residence, cultural experience, linguistic repertoire, and local status, to name a few, so the couples had to engage in something akin to what the characters in the film did – they had to establish some common social ground in order to create a sense of rapport and solidarity during the visit, and, like the characters in the film, they employed proverbs as the discursive means by which to gauge that social compatibility.

The prominence of teaching as a common factor made it easy to select it as the referential context for the utterance of the proverbial exchange. This proved important because Carmela and Hector's identities were still strongly linked to their profession, despite being several years into retirement. What furthered that

identity was their continued interaction with active teachers, their neighbors and acquaintances still greeting them by placing the title of *maestro/a* before their name, and Hector – having risen to the rank of principal of the local middle school before retiring – still being often consulted or kept informed about the school's administrative decisions. This aspect of their identity was therefore deeply ingrained in them and in the minds of most of the people who knew them.

So that when the couples spoke that afternoon in the comfort of Carmela and Hector's living-room, the conversation unsurprisingly turned to teaching. Hector sat in his staunch green vinyl armchair with his glasses securely placed on the bridge of his nose and the newspaper blanketing his lap. Gabriel sat facing him in the love seat, while Ana and Carmela sat next to each other on the sofa. Carmela, almost wistfully, asked Ana what grade she would be teaching the following school year. Ana answered that it would be the first time she would be teaching fourth grade, and that she looked forward to it with guarded optimism. This led them to talk about preparation, which in turn led them to acknowledge the importance of continuing teacher development.

Carmela complained that two older teachers who had been hired recently at a local school were clearly not interested in updating their teaching approaches, and she complemented this observation in this way*, "Pero como dicen, camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente*" [But as they say, the shrimp that falls asleep gets dragged away by the current]. Ana replied, "*Pues sí, el que adelante no mira, atrás se queda*" [Well yes, he who does not look forward, behind remains]. Gabriel asked the others to help him recall a proverb that said something to the effect of "*el que no oye consejos –*" [he who does not listen to advice –], and the others almost in unison finished it for him: "*El que no oye consejo, no llega a viejo*" [He who does not listen to advice, doesn't make it to old age].

Their conversation was unique in that after the uttering of each proverb, the customary pause intended for reflection did not follow. Instead, other proverbs that shared the basic idea that preparation and foresight are the foundation of progress quickly ensued. The resulting chain of proverbs extended, rather than truncated the conversation, and this is a use of proverbs that is uncommon, as proverbs are often used to present generalizing conclusions about a topic and thus draw discussions to a close. In contrast, the neat dovetailing of proverbs in the conversation of these four network members – and the shared values of personal responsibility, work ethic, foresight, and prudence expressed in them – suggests that the exchange of proverbs functioned as a tool for solidarity formation instead of tools for status differentiation.

Establishing solidarity and rapport was important in this case because Ana and Gabriel resided in the U.S. and were visiting the extended family in Janácuaro

whose members were firmly committed to their place in the family's country of origin. By uttering proverbs that implicitly communicated particular social values and manifested a valued oral genre, these members of the social network reaffirmed their shared background in an efficient and highly marked verbal way. The conversation demonstrated that proverbs were invoked not only to express a given idea in a sanctioned and creative way, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to index – and thus generally (re)create – the network's place of origin, its social values, and the personal traits of the network members, and their interpersonal relations.

This type of discursive interaction exemplifies how the network participants carry out a social action by uttering proverbs. The use of proverbs is a dynamic element in conversations and social interactions; the proverbs the network members use can thus be said to carry meanings beyond the purely semantic since they affect social status and, correspondingly, effect social changes. The following analysis demonstrates in more detail how proverbs are used to carry out social objectives, and it reveals the cognitive skills and socio-cultural knowledge necessary for the successful manipulation and processing of some proverbs used by the members of the López social network.

4.2. The aims of proverb use

The following analysis of proverbial expressions is by no means exhaustive, but it does identify the general discursive functions of proverbs as used by the López social network. By virtue of addressing the discursive functions, the analysis also highlights some of the salient cognitive aspects of proverb processing (i.e., the understanding of proverbs) that very often go unnoticed in regard to oral means of communication in general, but particularly in regard to those perceived as formulaic expressions. The following descriptions are meant to illustrate common situations in which proverbs were called upon to meet a social need; to phrase this more directly, the López social network used proverbs as tools for arguing, advising, uniting, and entertaining.

Indeed, the socio-discursive functions of this oral genre in this network roughly resonate with the "functions" of the elements that constitute verbal communication according to Roman Jakobson (1960). In considering the importance of poetics in the field of linguistics, Jakobson suggests that a linguistic communicative exchange, or speech event, involves six constitutive factors, each of which foregrounds a particular orientating function in linguistic communication: an Addresser (who serves an emotive function), a Context (which serves a referential function), a Message (which serves a poetic function), a Contact

(which serves a phatic function), a Code (which serves a metalinguistic function), and an Addressee (who serves a conative function). Jakobson's theoretical postulations concerning the constitutive factors of linguistic communication can be characterized as a dissection of the form and function nexus. So that when proverbs are considered, as they are here, as socially-sanctioned forms of expression, Jakobson' theoretical construct requires that their function be accounted for in relation to these six interdependent elements. The interdependence of these constitutive factors prohibits us from thinking that only one function is being served in a communicative exchange or speech event, but Jakobson does note that the functions are organized hierarchically in relation to the goal of the speech event, so that any given function may assume a predominant role or a particular prominence in light of the socio-communicative situation. This allows us to talk of the most prominent function apparent in regard to a speech event and the socio-communicative context in which that event is embedded.

In regard to the socio-communicative situations that I will describe in this chapter, the members of the López social network called on proverbs (1) to support an argumentative claim concerning behavior; (2) to teach or promote reflection by way of advice; or (3) to establish interpersonal rapport. An additional aspect in the use of proverbs which could arguably be considered a purpose in itself seemed to be (4) to add variety to a conversation and thus entertain or engage the listeners by virtue of the verbal creativity manifested in the proverb's poetic quality, but this seems to be an additional social function to one of the first three, as explained below. Furthermore, in keeping with Jakobson's theory, it is not my intention to suggest that the particular proverbs listed here are exclusively linked to the particular socio-communicative functions they instantiate in the following data, but rather to suggest that the form is secondary to the context, because the latter makes one particular function more prominent despite the presence of all the constitutive factors – and their attending functions – that Jakobson names. The social functions that proverbs serve, therefore, always have to be considered in relation to their social context.

The first social function (to make evaluative claims about behavior) that proverbs were called on to serve within the López social network corresponds with Jakobson's notion that language in general has an "emotive" aspect, which is "focused on the ADDRESSER [and] aims [at] a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about" (354, emphasis in the original). The expression of a particular attitude, or moral orientation, is certainly the aim of uttering proverbs to comment on perceived social behavior – and this was the most common function of the social network's proverb use.

When a proverb was used to foreground the second social function, to teach or promote reflection, it was clear that the proverb was definitely oriented toward a

particular listener. Correspondingly, Jakobson's consideration of the "conative" aspect of language as one that makes manifest a message's "orientation toward the ADDRESSEE" (355, emphasis in the original) correlates with this use of proverbs by the network members.

The third function, the establishing of rapport among the interlocutors, promotes unity by stressing the involvement in the communication/message at hand; this function is related to the "phatic" aspect that Jakobson identifies in linguistic communication by stressing that it is the social contact that is sought more than a transfer of the semantic information. In regard to this aspect, Jakobson observes that

> there are messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works ('Hello, do you hear me?') to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention. . . . This set for CONTACT, or in Malinowski's terms PHATIC function [. . .], may be displayed by a profuse exchange or ritualized formulas, by entire dialogues with the mere purport of prolonging communication. (Jakobson 1960: 255; emphasis in the original)

This consideration of what aspect of linguistic exchange assumes prominence in a given socio-communicative situation was certainly supported by the data provided by the social network. There were instances of prolonged exchange of proverbs that seemed to serve no other social function than to communicate a shared code (or "channel") among the interlocutors, and this clearly furthered their rapport and made moments of solidarity-formation evident, as was the case in the interaction described above between Ana and Gabriel and their hosts Carmela and Hector.

Finally, about the poetic aspect of language, which corresponds to the pleasure derived from the proverbial form, Jakobson says that it "is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant determining function, whereas in all other verbal activities it acts as subsidiary, accessory constituent" (356). Proverbs are poetic in the sense that their syntax is often differentiated from that of ordinary discourse (e.g., they're often cast in the passive voice; the subject of the utterance is generic and is commonly presented as a pronoun without antecedent; the relationship between the subjects of compound expressions is vague); they tend to use prosodic features such as rhyme, meter, and parallelism; and they are meant to be taken figuratively, as they consist of metaphor and allusion. However, the calling of attention to the poetic quality of proverbs is practically never the primary function of proverbs in use, and so, although their poetic quality may be a dominant feature of proverbs, as Jakobson correctly observes, the foregrounding of their aesthetic quality is not the "sole function" when they are employed in common communicative exchanges. That is, when

proverbs are called on to communicate oblique messages (rather than to present direct metalinguistic analysis or insight) they always carry out another social function in addition to foregrounding their poetic features.

It bears repeating that although the López social network used proverbial utterances to serve three primary socio-discursive functions (entertaining being a secondary one), this does not mean that the proverbs presented in this discussion are intrinsically suited to the use to which they were put in the situations described here. That is, any given proverb could conceivably be used in regard to any one or all four of these socio-discursive functions, and for this reason the aim of this analysis is not the categorization of particular proverbs in relation to the functions identified, but the aim is instead an examination of the use to which they were put – and how they came to be understood – by the network members. Moreover, just as Jakobson observes that "although we distinguish six basic aspects of language, we could, however, hardly find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function" (353), so do I consider here that any given proverb may fulfill more than one function at any given time. Nevertheless, and once again in agreement with Jakobson's theoretical positioning, it is suggested that a proverb's acute dependence on context for its meaning renders a "hierarchical order of functions," to use Jakobson's words, that leads to the consideration of one salient function in regard to a given proverb in a particular context.

In order to illustrate this point, we can examine a few proverbs for each of the first three categories outlined above in an effort to give a sense of the type and variety of proverbs encountered among the network. Passing reference to the poetic qualities of each proverb will also be made in order to address the fourth category (i.e., the poetic/performative aspect of proverb use), without suggesting that it is an autonomous socio-discursive function. To reiterate, people who generally use proverbs as social tools do not use them to analyze or call attention to the form's poetic features; to treat the poetic quality of proverbs as serving an autonomous socio-aesthetic function is thus misleading because proverbs – unless they're decontextualized – are not normally called on by non-specialists to evaluate the wonders of language but are instead used to execute a more socially advantageous function than that one.

Another conceptual tool employed to shed light on the phenomenon of proverb processing is that of schema. This concept was initially conceived by Frederic C. Bartlett (1932), who talked about it as

> an active organisation of past reactions, or of past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operating in any well-adapted organic response. That is, whenever there is any order or regularity of behaviour, a particular response is possible only because it is related to other similar responses which have been

> serially organised, yet which operate, not simply as individual members coming one after another, but as a unitary mass. (Bartlett 1932: 201)

Understandably, researchers have reduced Bartlett's vague notion of "schema" to background knowledge in regard to any given domain and its impact on memory recall (Rayner and Pollatsek 1989; Caroll 1999). The idea is that background knowledge is used as a basic cognitive framework for organizing incoming information (an arrangement of compartments, if you will, that serves to organize and arrange incoming stimuli in a familiar and predictable pattern), and that this enhances memory recall and comprehension. It is for this reason that one popular example of schemata in action is that of going to a restaurant. The activity develops in a very predictable way, and, once a person has had the experience of going to a restaurant, the restaurant-visit schema is fixed because the events that go on in subsequent restaurant visits seem relatively invariable (and the few differences that do surface on subsequent visits can be assimilated easily into the existing conceptual framework).

Although background knowledge is a major component of schema theories in regard to cognitive processing, there is an equally important aspect in Bartlett's conception of schemata that is often ignored: the notion that mental connections leading to understanding are dynamic rather than static. Hence, mere previous knowledge in the guise of discrete facts is not what Bartlett intended by this term, but rather that it is the active mental effort to ascribe meaning to a series of concurrent stimuli (or events) by virtue of past experience with similar stimuli or referents. Thus, schema theory informs a theory of proverb processing in this way: In order to understand a proverb, listeners must not only have background information in regard to the discrete items that are alluded to in the proverb's content (the literal items), but they must also be able to mentally manipulate the inter-relationships among those items to reach an understanding that is suitable for the context.

Here is an example. Let us say that my friend Sandy and I meet to play a game of basketball. She takes notice of the extravagant attire I wear to the match. I insist that the professional shoes and uniform I wear serve to reflect my athletic ability. While we play basketball, it becomes clear that I am no match for my opponent. Sandy then says, "You know what they say, one can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." Her comment makes me pause, because the relevance of her comment to our context is not immediately apparent, but then I hang my head in defeat and nod in agreement.

In order to understand the proverb Sandy used, one must know *more* than what the literal referents are (i.e., silk, purse, sow's ear); one must also recognize that the target of her proverbial commentary (my attire and inability to play well)

has nothing to do with these items per se but with the relationship between them. In order to properly process the proverbial message, those people listening to it must activate a schema (mental repository of structured relationships) that enables them to recognize the relationship between a silk purse and a sow's ear. Such a schema would involve the continuum between base and refined items, production of one item from another, and the potential end-result of an activity regardless of effort. In order to talk about mental processing of proverbs, then, we have to consider that something akin to schema activation is necessary so that two very disparate contexts (e.g., the making of a purse and the playing of a game) and referents (i.e., attire, skills, silk purse, sow's ear) may be reconciled, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Mental reconciliation of disparate referents and contexts

Particular situation	Cognitive task	General observation
Immediate context (playing a game)		Figurative context (making a purse)
	←Abstraction and synthesis→	
Immediate referents (clothing, skills)	(recognition of relational similarity based on cultural associations)	Figurative referents (sow's ear; silk purse)

Moreover, the reconciliation of the disparate items involves the recognition that the deceptively declarative statement (i.e., the proverb) is a figurative one (which necessarily involves a comparison). Once this is done, the point of using the proverbial utterance is to focus on the abstract relationship between the items mentioned in it and those of the immediate context in which the proverb is uttered.

The importance of context cannot be overstated, as this proverb may be understood even without knowledge of what the discrete referents are. That is, a listener may infer the abstract meaning of the expression by examining the relation of the items mentioned in the proverb to each other. So that the generally uncommon referent "a sow's ear" may still be understood to mean something *base* when we recognize that the explicit comment is that it is not – nor can it become – something as *refined* as a silk purse; where *baseness* and *refinement* are both grounded in particular cultural value judgments.

The important communicative aspect of the proverb, then, is the relationship expressed (the abstract category) among the particular items mentioned (the concrete referents) rather than knowledge of all those items themselves. However, knowledge of some part of the referential components (e.g., silk, purse, the act of making something) is necessary for discernment of the relationship

being expressed, and this speaks directly to schema theory and socio-cultural particulars.

Just to further clarify the last point concerning knowledge of the referential components and their cultural significance, consider one more example. Americans unfamiliar with the British proverb, "penny wise, pound foolish," are likely to misinterpret the reference to "pound" as alluding to the weight measure instead of the currency. The referent identified by the shared term is culturally particular, and therefore knowledge of key referential components is in order before the relationship between the referents themselves, as well as their connection to the situational context that prompts the use of the proverb, is successfully identified.

The identification of the cognitive skills involved in the processing of proverbs leads us to consider the linguistic and intellectual sophistication of those who use and understand proverbs, and to ponder the dangers of dismissing oral traditions as unsophisticated exercises based simply on rote memorization. That the practice of using proverbs in daily conversations and across generations (as proverbs are commonly used when children are present or to instruct adolescents whose incipient autonomy must be acknowledged in the course of didactic interaction) among the residents of Janácuaro, even when these move beyond this setting, tells us that the cognitive and linguistic value of this form of expression contributes to the sophistication of younger members undergoing socialization within the group. The following examination of actual data further illustrates how complex these figurative expressions are by identifying some of the mental and cultural resources drawn on by the network members who made use of the proverbs in their conversations.

4.3. Using proverbs to argue

Cuando el santo necesita la vela, hay que prendérsela

When the saint needs the candle, one must light it.

The sun's glorious descent into the maw of the steep sierra surrounding Janácuaro is an image worthy of a postcard; yet, it is a view that the locals take for granted – or are forced to, in any case, by the unending list of chores that need their attention. It is only after most of the daily chores have been taken care of – including the serving of supper at 3 p.m. – that I have the opportunity to sit with Martha and Tere (María López's two sisters) on the porch of Martha's house. We engage in the customary *plática*, or chat, that the late afternoon seems to invite. On this occasion, we talk about the family, and the conversation turns to two of

Martha's daughters, Veronica and Irene, whose personalities changed drastically after getting married while they were still teenagers. We talk about the trials and tribulations of married life, which prompts Martha to recall a confrontation she had with Pedro, Veronica's husband. She talks about the mistreatment to which Pedro subjected Veronica, and about being unable to contain herself when Pedro imputed the infidelity of which he was guilty to her daughter. In the heat of argument, Martha revealed to Pedro that she was aware of his extramarital affair and gave voice to it in the presence of her husband and one of her daughters-in-law. After she had rebuked Pedro and he had departed, her husband told her that although she had been right to rebuke him, she should not have exposed him as she did because "those things should not be said" [*esas cosas no se dicen*]. Martha responded to her husband with the proverb, "*Cuando el santo necesita la vela, hay que prendérsela*" [When the saint needs the candle, one must light it].

Martha clearly used the proverb to justify and support her actions since her husband questioned whether she should have publicly revealed Pedro's extramarital affair. In voicing his opinion, Martha's husband used a prescriptive key,[2] which effectively communicated that his challenge was based on an established sense of etiquette or normative behavior. Martha deftly, though perhaps unconsciously, replied in kind; by using the proverb, she too made an allusion to a collective and traditional sense of proper behavior because a proverb itself usually cannot be traced to a particular person but to the wisdom of the many and is implicitly supported by time-honored experience. The use of the proverb allowed Martha to deflect personal fault in her handling of the situation by disavowing personal authorship and judgment and imputing them to the social collective.

Martha's use of the proverb is, thus, a deft rhetorical maneuver because it works on more than one socio-communicative level. Although Martha implicitly claims to be merely a conduit of traditional wisdom by making use of a traditional expression, she, in the process, also makes manifest a reconfiguration of social values, gender roles, and normative behavior. By using a "traditional" (i.e., inter-generationally sanctioned) form of expression to counteract her husband's equally "traditional" argument, Martha, ironically, effects a reconfiguration of what is considered proper/traditional behavior[3] (which in this particular case would have led her to stifle her voice/opinion); to put it more concisely, where her husband calls for discretion and propriety, Martha calls for clarity and ac-

2 I rely on Hymes' (1974: 57) use of the term to signal "the tone, manner, or spirit in which [a speech] act is done."

3 I am indebted to Beth A. Buggenhagen for her observation on the reconfiguration of socio-cultural values brought about by the utterance of the proverb, and to Rachel Reynolds for her observation on the paradoxical nature of proverbs as simultaneously being implements of socio-cultural continuity and reconfiguration.

countability. Martha's claim to her right to point out injustice (e.g., the slandering of her daughter) and call for restitution challenges her husband's notion of what should take precedence (i.e., social decorum), and this in effect suggests a shift in the weight of competing values. What is more, Martha also claims a stronger role for women by virtue of her rhetorical victory over her husband and by serving as a spokesperson against gender-based abuse. Martha's defense of her daughter against gender-based abuse is anchored in Martha's deft use of a proverbial expression that shifts authorship and authority from her to her society's traditions, and this rhetorical move allows Martha to present her argument as embedded in traditional continuity when it is in fact an appeal to the reconfiguration of existing social behavior and roles. Martha's argumentative strategy may even be seen as the foundation for future normative behavior; that is, Martha's successful argument may influence her family, friends, and neighbors (i.e., her community) to the extent of having them respond similarly if/when they are confronted with similar situations. In fact, Martha's performance demonstrates how the felicitious use of proverbs, enabled by socio-cultural knowledge, transforms the "'semantically incomplete' proverb text into powerful evaluative and exhortative speech acts," according to Briggs (1988: 133).

But the social function of the proverb is predicated on its understanding, and so we must turn to its ideational components. The first mental task involved in the processing of the proverb is the recognition of its referents. There are three major items in the proverb: saint [icon], candle, and light. Martha's proverb relies on conventional metaphorical associations such as light(ing) with action, votive candle with offering, and saints with divine intercession. These three components take on a second degree of signification when their figurative relation to the context the proverb is called on to address becomes apparent (i.e., when the proverb is processed mentally). That is, when the proverb is entextualized – seen only as a text having no bearing on a particular social context – only its literal meaning is apparent, but when it is used in an immediate social context it is contextualized and assumes a figurative meaning. The proverb used in context cannot be understood as anything other than a figurative expression because its referents are not reconcilable with those of the immediate context. In this case, for example, the listener who tries to reconcile the proverb literally with the immediate context will very likely be confused and ask, "What do saints and candles have to do with rebuking your son-in-law?" The answer is nothing; it is only in the recognition of the former items as symbolic or figurative representations of something that does relate to rebuking someone that the proverb will make sense.

In making use of the proverb, Martha succinctly communicates the defense of her actions and justifies them by appealing to the social values encapsulated in the proverb's symbolic foundation. So that once the proverb is contextualized,

the second degree of meaning that the proverb's components take are the lighting of a candle with the telling of the truth, the presentation of the votive candle with the carrying out of one's duty, and the adoration of the saint with promoting a desired resolution.

In order to understand this contextualization of the proverb, the listener must reconfigure the elements of the proverb in terms relevant to the context. To manage this, the listener must recognize the implicit cultural information communicated by the particular items mentioned in the proverb.

The proverb is centered on a practice that is inextricably bound to morality, piety, and duty in the collective Mexican psyche: the adoration of saints. In terms of religious practice, Catholicism saturates most of the social and physical landscape of the country, particularly in the countryside. For this reason, Martha's allusion to the traditional practice of lighting votive candles before religious icons is easily recognizable to many people and to most Mexicans in particular. This ritual seeks to effect divine intercession. In order to effect the intercession, however, the particular saint the devotee wishes to implore has to be presented an offering, or at least be prayed to. The votive candle comes to be the symbol of that devotion by standing as the offering paid in homage to the deity; it is the devotee's duty to present such an offering to receive the favor sought.

When these particulars are known, it becomes clear that the exposing of a slanderer and the honoring of a saint are incongruous contexts that can only be reconciled via a comparison. The proverb presents the basis of that comparison on the grounds of a metaphor for action and duty: in this case, the lighting of a candle, which is clearly a metaphoric representation of discovery (i.e., bringing something to light where it can be examined). Having made that connection, the listener can correlate the particulars of the apparently incongruous contexts – that of the proverb (the literal) and that of the proverb's use (the figurative) – as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Reconciling the proverbial contex with the social context

	Exigency	Actor	Action/Response
Proverbial context (literal meaning)	Adore Saint	Devotee	Light a candle
Social context (figurative meaning)	Rebuke Pedro	Martha	Reveal information

Thus, the listener reaches the conclusion that just as a devotee is moved to action in order to receive divine intervention, so must someone who wants to correct a wrong be moved to action. In order to make the correlation of these abstract

ideas, the listener must recognize the metaphorical base of the proverb (i.e., the listener must not only recognize that the proverb is intended as a analogy instead of a literal comment, but must also recognize the metaphor being used). The metaphorical base activates the schema that is pertinent to the referents mentioned in the proverb (in this case it would be the knowledge of the ritual of the worshipping of saints). This schema is then related to the actual context of the conversation, so that the referents of the proverbial text and that of the actual context are examined for similarities. For this proverb, the similarities are mapped according to the items in Table 2: There is an exigency, an action that meets that exigency, and there is an actor who carries out the action. The similarity between the two contexts is addressed implicitly. It is the listeners who must do the mental work to see the correlation and make it explicit to themselves. That is why the proverb is so efficient in terms of communicating complex relationships: most of the communicative task is carried out mentally instead of orally. Once the listener is mentally led to the referents that instantiate an appeal, the task of persuading becomes much easier because less energy is spent on explanation.

Paradoxically, the same frugality that makes the proverbial expression communicatively efficient also poses the greatest risk of miscommunication since the whole message depends on the recognition of the appropriate metaphorical base and corresponding schema. This observation, however, begins to demonstrate how proverbs may illustrate the nexus of the cognitive processes involved in analogical thinking and the awareness of the cultural particulars that, generally speaking, govern social interaction.

Cae más pronto un hablador que un cojo

A braggart trips up sooner than does a cripple.

On another occasion, but in a similar setting, I mentioned to Martha and Tere that during a conversation with their sister, María, I had learned that during her adolescence María had felt some dislike for the man she later married, Aristeo López. She disliked him because his family was better off than most of the others in the small village, and he and his brothers were considered pompous and arrogant. They agreed that María had always seen Aristeo and his brothers as presumptuous, but they were quick to point out that María had nevertheless fallen in love with Aristeo after he began courting her. Tere then underscored that observation by saying, *"Cae más pronto un hablador que un cojo*" [A braggart trips up sooner than does a cripple].

Interestingly, the object of Tere's proverb was NOT Aristeo, who, in María's opinion had been the presumptuous one, but María herself. It became clear that

Tere was considering María the braggart because the latter had initially decried Aristeo's faults only to succumb to them later. That is, María's initial criticism of Aristeo portrayed her as his moral superior by placing her in the role of judge. When María later succumbed to Aristeo's charms, her initial disdain and criticism of Aristeo was considered to be insubstantial, and her moral stature was correspondingly undermined. The proverb was thus used not only to teach a moral lesson (i.e., conceit undermines personal integrity) but to evaluate María's character as well. In the processing of this proverb, as indicated in Table 3, the major referents are paired with the abstract elements they target as follows.

Table 3. Pairing concrete with abstract referents

Concrete referent		Abstract referent
Braggart	→	Conceit
Cripple	→	Infirmity
Fall	→	Undoing

The connection between the concrete referents and the abstract ones, however, rests on the intensifier "*más rápido*" [sooner] because it serves as the base of the irony and pun (the creative/figurative aspect) of the proverb: it would be expected that the one who should "fall" sooner would be the cripple due to his impediment, but it is in fact the braggart that comes to his undoing (or, figuratively speaking, "falls") sooner in spite of being physically sound. This added dimension – the irony predicated on the pun involving the use of "*caer*" [to fall] – involves the reconfiguration of symbolic terms in order to make the comparison relevant to the context. That process of reconfiguration can be represented as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Mapping the process of symbolic reconfiguration

Concrete referent		Semantic vehicle		Cognitive task		Abstract referent
Boasting	►	Pun on "fall" (figurative)	►	Reconfiguration of symbolic terms	►	Fall relates to moral integrity
Walking impediment	►	Pun on "fall" (literal)	►	N/A	►	Fall relates to physical integrity

Looking at Table 4, we see that the reconfiguration of symbolic terms is required only of the concrete referent "boasting" because the term "fall" has a recognizably figurative aspect. That is, since one can fall physically due to a walking

impediment, the term "fall" can be considered in a literal sense in relation to that action, but since one cannot fall physically as a result of making an utterance, the term "fall" has to be considered in a figurative sense in relation to that action, and, therefore, this triggers a reconfiguring of symbolic terms.

The proverb relies on irony and pun to communicate how the message should be interpreted.[4] In this case, the pun on the word "fall" (a physical "fall" and a "fall" from grace) sets up the ironic observation of the proverb: it is the braggart who falls (figuratively) instead of the cripple, the one who is (literally) more likely or expected to fall. The pun on the word *caer* [fall] is evidently the heart of the metaphorical expression because it allows us to move effortlessly from the figurative "tripping" on words that the braggart is destined for (i.e., the braggart's downfall or undoing) to the literal tripping that we would likely expect to occur to someone with a walking impediment. The key to recognizing the message of the proverb, however, rests on the nearly colloquial use of the word *hablador* for "braggart," and it is therefore here that we see the importance of a culturally-bound referent and the nuances of meaning that it evokes. The word is commonly used to refer to a prattler or idle chatterer, but in this region it is commonly used to refer to someone who is given to empty boasting about personal ability or stature. María's initial – but overtly spoken – disdain for Aristeo indicated that it would be beneath her to succumb to his charms. The fact that she then accepted him proved that her personal (moral) integrity was compromised as a result of her own words, and she was thus exposed and embarrassed, just as the proverb – through the use of the word "fall" – insinuates about the braggart.

In addition to the conceptual foundations of the proverb, its social functions are central to its understanding. How was it communicated that it was María and not Aristeo who was the object of the proverb? The answer lies in the sequence of the utterances, which may be seen as a contextualization cue (the latter concept being defined by Gumperz [1982: 131] as "any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signaling of contextual presuppositions"). The proverb was uttered immediately after pointing out María's change of heart about Aristeo, as if to punctuate that observation. This suggests that María's behavior was the object of the proverb's moral lesson. However, since María was not there to respond to – or, for that matter, learn – the lesson, the proverb was recognizably not meant to address her in particular but to address the situation she represented in our conversation: the making of a claim that goes contrary to future actions. Tere's proverb addressed this situation and evaluated it, and, by extension, also

4 Dundes (1981: 51), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1981: 119), and Pepicello and Green (1984: 9) list other non-syntactic factors that can influence the recognition of utterances as proverbs.

evaluated María's character. Thus, the anecdote of María's change of heart, when combined with the proverb that Tere used to comment on that experience, serves to reinforce and justify a culturally based social value: the value of discretion and humility over boastfulness and conceit.

Ironically, María later found herself championing the value of discretion when she was engaged in a conversation with her sister-in-law. The type of familial ties between the two women appears to be a key factor not only in the way they interacted with one another but also in the obliquely admonishing tenor of the proverb that was used to argue a point.

Como la lengua no tiene hueso, la movemos para todos lados

Since the tongue has no bone, we move it every which way.
A conversation with her sister-in-law, Carmela, led María to take umbrage. The relationship between the two women had a long history, given that their families had lived as neighbors during the women's upbringing. In fact, María, being Carmela's elder by eight years, had actually seen Carmela grow up. María had even been responsible for her when, as an adolescent, Carmela enjoyed extended stays at her brother's home once he and María had married. Despite the deference that Carmela might have been expected to owe María on the basis of their age difference and their personal history, Carmela rarely, if ever, acknowledged a status disparity. Instead, the two women commonly treated and addressed each other as equals in the eyes of all who knew them. Even so, the degree of intimacy that went with almost a lifetime of contact was tempered by a tacit formality that was only revealed to the most perspicuous observers. For instance, the women always used their given names to address each other instead of using nicknames or terms of endearment such as *'manita* (sis) or *Mari*, as some of María's other relatives, *compadres*, and friends were accustomed to doing.

Whatever the relative distance that did exist between the women, it was rendered even more suspect by Carmela's ignorance – feigned or not – of María's sensitivity to Carmela's evaluative comments – particularly as these concerned María's family. Carmela's commentary extended freely to include the experiences and behavior of María's relatives. The comments tended to be unabashedly judgmental, and outspoken, and that María would not respond in kind to Carmela, on what the former considered to be personal matters, was epitomized by the use of a proverb when Carmela reported that one of María's grand-nephews had participated in a crime.

"*Como la lengua no tiene hueso, la movemos para todos lados*" [Since the tongue has no bone, we move it every which way] was María's response to

Carmela's report. Not deterred, Carmela punctuated her report by adding that the young man in question apparently "knew a federal agent who protected him." María, in keeping with the indirect nature of her response, followed the proverb with the claim that people mustn't be judged too quickly when there are no first-hand accounts or evidence involved.

The heart of María's argument was thus made clear, but the metaphorical foundations of the proverb deserve explanation, as does its selection as the rhetorical choice for this social context.

Like the previous examples, this particular instance of proverb use is marked by the initially unapparent relevance of the proverb's topic. The anatomical structure of the tongue is the literal signifier that must be reconciled with a figurative one in order to attribute the proper meaning to the expression. The impeded motion attributed to the central signifier is accounted for rather easily, as the very issue involved is the verbal dissemination of information. People spread the rumor by talking, and the tongue is, per force, involved in this activity. What is less obvious is the corresponding idea that is linked to the tongue's instantiated anatomical anomaly – its lack of a skeletal structure.

Thus the listener of the proverb might approach the cognitive task of reconfiguring the symbolic significance of the proverb's syntactically-positioned right-most semantic component (i.e., the tongue's motion) as diagrammed in Table 5.

Table 5. Reconfiguration of symbols for María's "tongue" proverb: Cognitive subtask A

Concrete referent		Cognitive task and schema involved		Abstract referent
Unimpeded tongue	→	➢ Reconfiguration of symbolic terms • tongue motion essential for speech • particular motion (i.e., "every which way") connotes unpredictability • speech is a common means of disseminating information	→	Indiscrete speech

But what of the reference to "bones"? If the topical referent of the proverb is the tongue, and the right-most semantic element focuses on its motion, the syntactically-positioned central semantic element focuses on its structure. The comment concerning the tongue's structure must also be read figurative, lest it is considered a purely declarative – and therefore literal – observation that conveys little – if any – meaning in the context in which it was used. Correspondingly, the symbolic reconfiguration task of the central syntactic/semantic segment would likely proceed in the way outlined in Table 6.

Table 6. Reconfiguration of symbols for María's "tongue" proverb: Cognitive subtask B

Concrete referent		Cognitive task and schema involved		Abstract referent
Lack of bones	→	➢ Reconfiguration of symbolic terms • Bones are rigid and thus binding • Bones make up skeletal structure essential for support • Bones/Skeletal structure connotes core or integral quality	→	Lack of integrity

Thus the proverb's symbols and their reconfiguration lead to a sense of the proverb's relevance in this context, which may be explained this way: If evidence and first-hand experience grant one facts upon which to form an opinion, the lack of them also restrict the conclusions that one should form. The metaphorical allusion in the proverb indicates that idle or slanderous comments neglect the tempering aspect of the lack of facts, just as the physical organ that articulates those opinions lacks a skeletal frame that restricts its movement. As a result, the conceptual parallels that are drawn on the basis of the proverb's synechdochic commentary are that "[people with] slanderous tongues" lack the "substantive framework" that befits a person with moral integrity.

But even with this interpretation of the symbolic significance of the proverb's referents, there is still the discursive matter concerning María's decision to use this rhetorical strategy to respond to Carmela's "report." That is, why does she choose this rather oblique means to "confront" Carmela's critical commentary – particularly when María is dealing with an intimate member of her family that she has known for over 30 years?

The most likely answer lies in the social status disparity that exists between the two women, and which is therefore a part of the social context for this proverb's use. Just as Seitel (1981) points out that a proverb's meaning may be interpreted differently on the basis of the status of the addressor and the addressee (see Ch. 3: 55–56) and which Seitel considers aspects of the "social context," it is also true that social context involves ideological constraints as well, and these, in turn, have a direct effect on the discursive options available to a speaker who subscribes to them. In this case, Carmela's status as a respected former teacher whose status in the community is continuously manifested in the greetings and nods she receives when she is out in public undermines the cultural expectation that she, by virtue of being the younger of the two interlocutors, should display deference to María, a virtually anonymous manual laborer with an elementary-school education, even if the latter is the elder of the two women

and stood as a figure of authority over Carmela at one time. María evidently upholds the collective social view of Carmela as a person of prestige within her community, and this forces her to treat Carmela as a peer – if not a social superior – to whom respect (i.e., lack of imposition) is due. In observing and accepting the social status disparity between them, María chooses the indirect rhetorical strategy precisely because it allows her to express her dismay while it upholds the ideology of respect (i.e., decorum) that ensures social cohesion and order in the face of established inequality.

The intermingling of discursive practice, socio-cultural foundations, and cognitive skills is made rather apparent by this instance of proverb use to argue. Moreover, the preceding examples of contextualized proverb use can be seen, therefore, not only as an exercise in social commentary, but also as a reflection of potential socialization processes – which leads to another common function of proverb use in this social network: proverbs as vehicles for advice.

4.4. Using proverbs to give advice

No escupas al cielo lo que a la cara te cairá

Don't spit at the sky that which to your face will fall.
Back in Chicago, the valuing of humility and discretion was again communicated through the use of a proverb. This time, however, it became apparent that the proverb was intended to serve as advice in addition to commenting on a situation. I sat with Aristeo and María López in their kitchen. It was late in the evening and their house was unusually quiet. At one point they asked each other the whereabouts of their sons. María considered that one them was out with his girlfriend, of whom, I had learned, she did not approve. She then made some general comments of disapproval concerning the selection of mates on the part of their sons. This led Aristeo to allude to what was then the ailing marriage of one of his sons. That son was José, who, as Aristeo explained, was particularly boastful as a bachelor about his control over women, men, and any situation before him. I gathered that such confidence was no longer characteristic of José, since Aristeo and María commented that José's wife "did whatever she pleased" and José, whether by choice or not, appeared to have no control over her. Aristeo, as in conclusion, then uttered the following proverb*: "No has de escupir al cielo, [lo] que a la cara te cairá*" [You mustn't spit at the sky, that which to your face will fall].

Aristeo thus spoke disapprovingly of his son's boastfulness, but I considered that the proverb in this case was also meant to serve as advice because of

the asymmetrical status relationship that characterized us as interlocutors. That is, we were only three interlocutors, Aristeo, María, and I. The two of them shared the status of peers by virtue of their relationship, age, and experience. If anything, their status was asymmetrical only in terms of gender. But since the economy of advice trades in experience, the one who appeared to be the intended beneficiary of the proverb's accepted truth was me. I was the younger member in this discussion and was thus, by default, seen – even by myself – as the one with less life-experience, and hence the one more in need of advice.

In addition, José was not present, and thus the proverb could not be said to have been uttered to benefit him in terms of advice nor to rebuke him. Finally, another contextualization cue that indicated to me that I should take the proverb as advice was its syntax. The proverb makes use of the imperative mood (e.g., "*no has*" [you mustn't]), and the familiar (rather than the formal) second person pronoun (i.e., "*has*" and "*te*" instead of "*ha*" and "*le*"). This clearly communicates a command issued to a peer or a subordinate, and, given this conversational setting, the syntactic choice helps the listener construe the utterance as advice (i.e., the speaker's opinion of what action would most benefit the intended listener).

Although Aristeo did not elaborate on the reason for uttering the proverb, my analysis suggests that he disapproved of José's previous boastfulness or overconfidence. This is evident by considering that the proverb is centered on the metaphorical action of spitting at the sky. The action of spitting conveys scorn or disrespect. The sky is representative of extreme heights when taken literally, but that intrinsic physical characteristic is metaphorically translated to an extraordinarily positive quality that is alluded to in both English and Spanish by such common expressions as "your highness" ("*su alteza*"), "at the pinnacle of success" ("*en la cumbre del exito*"), or "a high-minded reformer" ("*un reformista con alteza de miras*"). For this reason, spitting, or showing disdain for something as lofty as the sky, is characterized as folly that incurs the disdain or scorn that prompted the act itself.

What is less clear in Aristeo's use of the proverb is what moral principle José had disdained, although it could be his reluctance to adhere to the principle of humility and discretion. Since humility and discretion are virtues that are almost inherently violated by an intemperate tongue, Aristeo's use of a proverb that calls attention to the negative consequences of vocal follies seems even more appropriate because it addresses his communicative concerns on several levels: that of expressing scorn for something that should be honored; that of speaking without regard for consequences; that of retribution for folly; and that of giving advice for those who may be in need of such. That Aristeo could address all these possible levels of communicative intent and/or message content, illustrates the

complexity of proverbs and the equally impressive mental resources that are put to the task in order to decipher and grasp the meaning(s) of any given proverb in use. These characteristics, in fact, underscore yet another paradoxical quality of proverbs: the ability to foreground the concrete and particular in order to express the general and abstract. But the fact that proverbs do exactly this confirms their suitability for encapsulating messages that are meant as advice, for the proverb's veiled message requires the co-construction of meaning between interlocutors, which in turn upholds the mutual autonomy that the giving of advice presumes, and which a direct order negates.

The giving of advice, then, foregrounds not only the preferred option in regard to any given matter under discussion, but it also communicates respect for the addressee's ultimate right to evaluate it as such. In regard to proverb use, the presence of contextual factors – not least of which are the status roles of the participants in regard to one another – are essential in determining whether this is the intended function of a given proverb.

Las piedras rodando, rodando se encuentran

Rocks roll and roll until they find each other.
Another instance of how a proverb comes to be understood as advice – primarily on the basis of the social interrelationship of the interlocutors – came when Ana made what appeared to be an innocuous comment to her older brother Miguél. Although they are only two years apart in age, the combining of the age difference with the gender difference was enough to subvert the acceptance of a proverb as advice on this occasion.

The group of interlocutors was small. Unlike on the weekends, when several members of the López network would commonly hold lengthy conversations that carried over well into the night, on this weekday evening, only María, her son Miguel, her daughter Ana, and I were present. After dinner, Aristeo had turned his attention to some mechanical task in the garage, and the rest of us kept María company as she attended to the seemingly endless kitchen chores. We sat at the kitchen table sipping coffee as María wiped countertops and placed leftovers in the refrigerator. The sound of her feet criss-crossing the kitchen floor and that of lids covering various pots or dishes were the back-beat to her *plática*, which in this case concerned yet another son's romantic relationships. The focus this time was not José but her son Tómas, elder brother to both Ana and Miguel, who had courted one of her best friend's daughters, and this against María's better judgment. María was quick to point out that she had explicitly warned Tómas against courting the young woman in question because she feared that a failed

courtship would affect the long-standing friendship she had with her *comadre*. The failed courtship was now a reality; the matter of its consequences was still pending but it seemed imminent.

After the failed courtship, the young woman in question had taken a job out of state, which had made it easy for María and her friend to ignore the matter. But as fate would have it, she had now decided to move back in with her parents, which meant that she and Tomás were bound to run into each other and make the family gatherings somewhat uncomfortable at best and at worst simply end the friendship.

Ana, at this point, turned to her brother Miguel, placed a hand on his shoulder, and said, "*Ya ves, las piedras rodando, rodando se encuentran*" [You see, rocks roll and roll until they find each other]. Miguel turned to her with a knotted brow and asked, "*¿Y a mí por qué me lo dices?*" [And why are you telling me?] "*Pues para que aprendas*," [So that you'll learn] was Ana's response. Miguel did not relax his brow nor did he acknowledge the proverb's relevance to him. Instead, he tightened his lips and mildly shook his head, thus dismissing Ana's comments and turning his attention to María once again.

Ana's overt claim that her intention was for Miguel to learn something is unusual but utterly in line with the argument presented here. It is rare to hear any of the network members proffer an explanation for their use of proverb, let alone one that confirms its functions in such an unambiguous way. Although we could hardly say that Ana was in fact teaching Miguel anything by uttering the proverb, her assessment of what she's doing in this situation is accurate in so far as she considers that Miguel should take note of what María is describing because it may benefit him. In this sense, then, she does recognize that there is a lesson to be learned and in alerting her brother to it, she is in effect advising Miguel, something she manages to do by selecting a proverb that parallels the central elements of the events María had recounted.

Tomás and his once-girlfriend were bound to meet again, to run into each other, as the figurative and idiomatic terms of the proverb put it; for if rocks tumbling haphazardly are bound to do so simply by virtue of serendipity, the fact that the two sweethearts had families that frequented each other almost guaranteed this re-encounter. In single-mindedly pursuing his love interest, Tomás had failed to evaluate the risks that María alerted him to. Ana sees this "lesson" and considers that Miguel should be aware of it as well, prompting her to overtly turn his attention to it. That Miguel rejects it does not invalidate her intention. Whether Miguel rejects the advise on the basis of his perceived superior status to Ana (by virtue of his age and gender), or in an attempt to save face (assume that he would not put himself in such a situation), is almost immaterial if we concern ourselves only with the aims of proverb use, but if we extend our focus

to the factors that enable the felicitous use of proverbs, then status differences between interlocutors is certainly relevant, as these grant the speaker the right to articulate a proverb just as they grant the listener the right to acknowledge it (and the intention behind it) – or not.

From a practical standpoint, Miguel seems to overreact to Ana's advice. That is, he could have just as easily nodded and acquiesced, agreeing with both Ana and María that the proverb was apt and consonant with the situation described: one should be mindful of the consequences of one's actions, particularly when they affect people one is likely to meet again. That he chooses to reject the advice Ana proffers is intriguing, and indicative of the effect of social status on interactive phenomena. The fact that the proverb originates out of a context of negative criticism (i.e., Tomás is being faulted), explains why Miguel would want to disassociate himself from it. He, like Tomás, share prominent features: their relative age, their gender, their sexual orientation, and their status in regard to María. Accepting the advice, would only further these associations by linking him to Tomás in judgment, or lack thereof, and thus diminish his face, or social standing.

Miguel probes the depth of implicatures by outright asking the question, "And why are you telling me?" Ana clarifies that she is not seeking to criticize him, but to teach him something. Despite the clarification of her intention, Miguel still does not acquiesce. His demeanor doesn't change, and he actually gestures the dismissal of the advice, which suggests that there is another social factor involved in his reaction, and the most salient is the disparity between the giver of the advice and the receiver of it. By definition, the adviser takes on a higher status by virtue of having wisdom to impart. The advisee is thus beholden to the adviser if the wisdom is accepted.

In Miguel's case, the accepting of Ana's advice, in addition to linking him to the object of criticism, compromises his status over her – even if temporarily. His role as her older brother sets him at a higher position in the social hierarchy. By accepting her unsolicited advice, Miguel actually runs the risk of subverting that position, which explains why something as "innocuous" as Ana's advice receives the response that it does from him. Social status and matters of face are thus as important in considering the felicitousness of proverb use as are matters of the intention prompting it.

Esas mansitas no me las des por buenas

Don't take the tame ones for good ones.

The identification of speaker intention is best approached via a consideration of contextualization cues, and, as mentioned, one of those is the roles constructed

on the basis of hierarchical social status. What confers social status, however, is culturally relative, and discernment of context therefore is premised on linguistic and cultural competence.

Recognizing the social function of particular discursive practices depends on cultural familiarity that can only be understood when the factors steering inferences are duly catalogued, so let us consider another instance of proverbs being used to give advice in order to see how such an intention is inferred and, correspondingly, implied.

The same day that Martha, Tere, and I talked about the trials of married life, we also talked about Martha's daughters, Irene and Veronica. Martha mentioned that their personalities had changed dramatically after they had married. Irene and Veronica were known for their pleasant demeanor as adolescents. Irene was known to be so shy as a child that she would hide beneath the kitchen table when out-of-town relatives came to visit, and Veronica was of a jolly nature and was rarely seen without a smile on her face. For this reason it seemed unusual that they had become stern and vociferous women. Irene, in particular, had been characterized as confrontational and assertive in her marriage. Here is a transcription of part of our conversation:

1) E: *Irene se escondía debajo de la mesa, ¿y ahora? ¡Qué carácter!*
   [Irene used to hide under the table, and now? What a temper!]
2) T: *Por eso te digo, que este, esas este – ¿cómo se dice? – mensitas, o mansitas, no me las des por buenas.*
   [That's why I tell you, that uh, those uh – how is it said? – goofy ones, or tame ones, don't take for good ones.]
3) E: ¿Las mansitas?
   [The tame ones?]
4) T: *Ajá. Pues fíjate, ahí tienes a Irene.* {*Risita*}
   [Aha. Well, look, there you have Irene.] {Chuckle}
5) M: *Pues dice, "Me hicieron sacar las uñas. Pues yo no tengo la culpa," dijo ella.*
   [Well, she says, "They made me bare my nails. So it's not my fault," she said.]
6) E: *Como dijo mi mamá, "La mula no era arisca –"*
   [As my mother said, "The mule wasn't bad-tempered –"]
7) M and T: *"– los palos la hicieron."* {*Risita*}
   ["– the beatings made it so."] {Chuckle}
8) T: *Sí, es cierto.*
   [Yes, it's true.]
9) M: *No, deveras, ellas no eran así. ¿Verdad 'mana?*
   [No, really, they weren't like that. Right, sis'?]
10) T: */Pues no./*
   [/Well, no./]

11) M: *Lo que es ella y Veronica, se hicieron bien –*
    [When it comes to her and Veronica, they became really –]
12) T: *Por lo mismo, porque son canijos.* {*Pausa*} *Yo también.*
    [For the same reason, because they (men) are mean. {Pause} Me too.]

In line (1), I emphasize the dramatic change in Irene's personality. To this, Tere replies in line (2), "*Por eso te digo… esas… mansitas no me las des por buenas*." [That's why I tell you… those… tame ones, don't take for good ones.] Tere introduced the proverb with the phrase, "*Por eso te digo*" [That's why I tell you], which is particularly important in terms of identifying this as advice because Martha was also there but seemed to be ignored in this respect. That is, Tere's use of "*te*" (singular familiar "you" instead of the plural "*ustedes*"), and the fact that she faced me when she uttered the proverb, begins to indicate that she identified me as her audience.

Nevertheless, even though the proverb was, on the surface, directed at me, it could also have been meant by Tere as *sub rosa* criticism of her nieces. This alternate intention is supported by what may be seen as Martha's defense of her daughter (line 5) after the proverb was uttered: "'They made me bare my nails' is what Irene says." Martha clarifies thus that her daughter was forced to become something she was not (i.e., fierce) and the use of an animalistic trait (i.e., baring her nails/ baring her claws) to convey this idea is of cognitive significance as I explain below.

For now, however, let us concentrate on the ambiguity of the intention behind the utterance of the proverb. It seems that Martha aims to dispel that ambiguity by seeking her sister's agreement on her assessment of her daughters' personalities (line 9): "They weren't like that [before they were married]. Right sis'?" Tere's agreement appears half-hearted, as her initial reply is a muttered "Well, no" (line 10), but which is then followed by a clear statement faulting the abusive men for their wives' change in personalities, in which case she includes herself (line 12).

In addition, the conversation following this excerpt continued without a change in tone and demeanor, and this suggested to me that Martha, at least, considered that the proverb was intended for me – a relatively young man at that time who could benefit from the proverb's advice – and not simply to criticize Irene and Veronica. My gender (heterosexual male), age (late twenties), and casual disposition (which might have seemed to be inexperience regarding human behavior) might have served as the salient factors that made the proverb suitable for me in Martha's estimation. Combining these characteristics with the fact that the proverb refers to females (the pronouns and adjectives are inflected to refer to the female gender) and cautions against relying on appearances for

judgment, Martha presumably considered that I was the one who clearly stood to gain from this advice. Moreover, Martha's insistence on her daughter's lack of fault reconfigured the object of the advice to be a caution against bringing about unwanted changes in someone as a result of abuse.

In regard to the cognitive aspects of this proverb, it is interesting to note that the use of the term "*mansitas*" [tame female ones] evidently activated a mental schema that readily corresponded to the setting and participants I was with. We sat in the porch of a humble house in a rural town, where the economy is still agriculturally based, and familiarity with livestock, beasts of burden, and predators is the norm. The use of the term "*manso*" [tame], by virtue of its common usage and reference in this type of setting, calls to mind the submissive nature of farm animals that are labeled as such, and by extension, the word also calls to mind its opposite, "wild" or "untamed." It not my intention to say that the object of the expression was to associate women with animalistic traits, but, instead, that the use of particular terms reveals how common terms used to describe the surrounding environment are used to describe – and influence the perception of – human nature and behavior. In this case, the women who are considered "tame" by appearance, I am cautioned, may harbor an inner "wild" nature that is yet to emerge or become evident.

This observation was not lost on Martha, who was quick to point out that her daughters were not duplicitous, but had been forced to change their quiet demeanor for outright assertiveness in response to the abusive treatment they had suffered at the hands of their husbands. I concurred by using a proverb of my own: "*La mula no era arisca; los palos la hicieron*" [The mule wasn't bad-tempered; the beatings made it so]. Unconsciously, I too used a proverb that referred to a farm animal and presented it as a metaphoric equivalent for the idea of transformation in personality that we were addressing. The animal-based schema had been activated by Tere's proverb, and, in my proverb repository, I had found a comparable phrase to respond to her observation. But in regard to the message of the proverb I selected, I made it clear – although unconsciously at the time – that I sided with Martha in observing that it was not a deceitful nature that I should guard myself against – and which was the core of Tere's advice – but instead, that I should be careful not to be oppressive and thus bring about unwanted changes in my mate.

This particular example of proverb use clearly makes evident the equally complex mental, linguistic, and cultural resources needed to untangle the multiplicity of meanings that can be derived from a proverbial expression. The complexity of social and linguistic factors (i.e., sociolinguistic aspects) and the inferences they invoke (i.e., cognitive aspects) is highly dependent on the social context in which the proverb is uttered and the mental acumen of the participants

who perceive both the context and the utterance. This consideration of context takes us to the third of the four social functions served by the use proverbs within this network: the use of proverbs to establish rapport.

4.5. Using proverbs to establish rapport

Más vale solo que mal acompañado

Better to be alone than in bad company.

Tomás, the second-oldest son of Aristeo and María, and nephew of Martha and Tere, is one of the Chicago-based network members who made the most trips to Mexico during the data-collection period of my research. On one of his visits, he spoke with his aunts to learn of the events that had transpired during his absence from the village. Martha began to tell him of the recent fate a mutual acquaintance had suffered as a result of a romantic relationship that had gone sour. They talked about an "older gentleman" who had been lured by the promise of a quiet life in the village with a local woman. Martha, Tere, and Tomás knew the woman in question, and Martha proceeded to narrate that after having his savings squandered and being generally disrespected by his common-law wife, the older gentleman decided to leave and take with him the few possessions he still had. To his chagrin, the older gentleman was accused of stealing by his spurned lover, and what was more, he had to testify before a magistrate that the items in his possession belonged to him, as well as many of the furnishings he had left in the woman's home. It was at this point that Tomás, on the verge of expressing outrage, commented that the older gentleman had done nothing but serve the woman and her family during the time he had lived with her, and followed his comment with the proverb*, "Por eso dicen que más vale solo que mal acompañado*" [That is why they say that it is better to be alone than in bad company].

Thematically speaking, the proverb is appropriate in this situation because it addresses the issue at hand: it is better to suffer a lesser evil (i.e., being alone) than risk a greater one (i.e., being in the company of wrongdoers). What is interesting here is that its intention does not seem to fit the functions discussed previously. That is, it seems highly unlikely that Tomás's intention would be a didactic one since his interlocutors are much older than he, and by extension are considered to be more experienced and knowledgeable about life and human behavior. It is even more unlikely that he intended to rebuke the wrongdoer in question or to give advice to the victim because neither was present. The proverb's transparent comparison and evaluation of the situation does little in terms of

furthering the discussion – for, indeed, proverbs usually bring conversations to a halt because they often present a concluding observation. But since Tomás was emotionally invested in this conversation, and since he was not the teller of the anecdote (which would give him the prerogative of offering the "moral" or what he perceived as the lesson to be gleaned from the account), it seems unlikely that his intention was to end the discussion.

What is more likely is that the interlocutors were a determining factor in what could be seen as the object of uttering the proverb. Although the proverb commented on the situation discussed, it did not do so for the moral edification of the interlocutors; rather, it served as an identification marker with them. That is, Tomás uses a proverb to communicate to his interlocutors that he agrees with the wisdom of the many and tradition, for that is the nature of the proverb: it is a collective repository of experience and code of evaluation. In addition, Tomás prefaces the value judgment with the phrase "*por eso dicen*" ["that is why they say"], which reaffirms that this is not his evaluation but that of "experience" (i.e., the ancestors or society), and this honors his interlocutors because they are, in relation to Tomás, part of the older generation. Thus we can conclude that Tomás – whether unconsciously or consciously – uses the proverb in this situation to establish rapport with his interlocutors by communicating to them that he is familiar with, and subscribes to, the moral lessons taught to him by the elders of the community of which the interlocutors are a part.

This use of proverbs reflects what Roman Jakobson (1960) identifies as the *contact* element in linguistic communication. Jakobson says that a *contact* "[is] a physical channel and *psychological connection* between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication" [my emphasis] (353). Tomás's use of the proverb, then, illustrates that the object is to maintain such a psychological connection; one that keeps all the interlocutors on the same page, so to speak, by making patent the interlocutors' investment in the values and traditions that are part and parcel of the proverb itself. The use of the proverb to establish rapport among the interlocutors reveals, then, that the proverb's salient social function is a phatic one because we see that the utterance is not meant to convince the listeners of something they do not already know, or need to be reminded of, but to maintain them engaged in social contact via this discursive practice. Thus we see that one's place in a social circle and the continuous reclaiming of that place and the elements that give it significance are central to understanding the use of proverbs as tools for establishing rapport, as the following supporting examples illustrate.

Dios da sombrero a los que no tienen cabeza

God gives hats to those who have no head.[5]

Late in the summer of my visit to Janácuaro, I found myself back in Chicago attending a Sunday afternoon barbecue at Aristeo and María's house. The gathering was not well attended – judging by the network's standards – but there were several adults present, including, José, Rodrigo, Miguel, and their respective spouses, Susana (Aristeo and María's youngest daughter) and one of her close friends, and, of course, the hosts, Aristeo and María. A few of the hosts' grandchildren intermittently ran up to the adults and asked for various things, but that was the extent of their influence on the adults' interaction. Amidst drinks, anecdotes, and sundry ephemeral conversations, the participants reminisced about the friends and relatives who had been among them in the recent past. In particular, María mentioned a French priest named Jean, of whom everyone present had heard of if not met. According to María, Jean had made an impression – even if slight – in the life of all those who had met him.

Having been assigned to their parish, Jean had immediately befriended the network members, and they in turn had made him an honorary member of the group. Their friendship was such that Jean extended their acquaintance to his own friends, when the latter travelled from France to visit him one summer. Unfortunately, when members of the social network and their French acquaintances met on French soil, Jean was not there; he had unexpectedly died while tending to his garden the autumn after his friends visited him.

In 1998 France hosted the Fédération Internationale de Football Association's (FIFA) World Cup, and the network members who were the most passionate about soccer inspired a few others to make the trip. In addition to enjoying the spectacle, they argued, the group would be able to reconnect with Jean's friends, which indeed happened. Those visiting France were María, Tita, Ana, Hilda, Tomás and Gabriel. According to María, they had made such a natural connection with their hosts that one of them, a well-to-do civil engineer, invited them to immigrate to his country, where he would make sure that they found jobs and where he would help them adjust. Dismissing it as a sign of courtesy and momentary zeal, none of them had taken the invitation seriously at the time. However, weeks after their return to the U.S., they found that the invitation had indeed been sincere and that it was reiterated in a letter addressed to them.

5 In the translation, I cast the proverb's object in the plural (i.e., hats) not only to satisfy the implied agreement in number between the object and the indirect object but, more importantly, to convey the aspect of continuous practice that the Spanish version conveys by combining the present indicative inflection of the verb (*da*) with the object cast in the singular but followed by a plural indirect object.

As it happened, while we listened to María's account of the events of the trip, we noticed that, aside from her, none of those who had made the trip to France were with us at this gathering, and thus couldn't speak to their consideration of the invitation. This did not stop the rest, however, from pondering whether those invited made the right decision in ultimately declining to emigrate to France. María, the iconic émigré in the annals of the social network, uttered her regret at not having accepted the offer but justified her decision by alluding to the difficulty of adjusting to a new country at her age. She considered, on the other hand, that Tomás and Hilda – neither of whom was married or had other worthwhile reasons at the time – should have tried their luck and emigrated.

José followed her comment with the proverb, "*Dios da sombrero a los que no tienen cabeza*" [God gives hats to those who have no head], and in doing so, he affirmed María's position just as he added an evaluative nuance of his own. María had clearly expressed her disapproval of her children's decision, but José had punctuated that evaluation by casting it in the traditional form of the proverb. Like Tomás in the previous example, José's use of a proverb did more than simply paraphrase María's comment or align him with her position, even though it did both. Since he could have done both things by expressing his agreement in a more literal and simple way, his creative choice suggests another function in addition to those. That is, rather than say, "I agree with you," José's figurative expression indexes a broader alignment with a tradition, a way of talking that is valued, and which links individuals to each other on the basis of what they share as a group. José establishes a rapport with those present on this basis.

Attention to interlocutor rapport is crucial in this situation because the proverb does carry some negative criticism, as it suggests a degree of unfairness in the way providence gives a gift to those who have no use or need for it. But it is precisely because José is criticizing those who aren't present to defend themselves that his decision to use a proverb is rhetorically effective. Unlike María, who as an elder is in a position to speak in plain evaluative terms, José has to be careful with his words, lest he alienates the interlocutors present.

José establishes his rapport with them in the same way that Tomás and Martha did when they had to present negative evaluations of others; he resorts to the proverb as an established means of expression that culturally prefaces any commentary with a collective sanction before it delivers the brunt of its verdict. There is more to the use of proverbs than rhetorical awareness, however.

The foundational cognito-linguistic processes must be in place before we get to the socio-rhetorical ones, for it is the cognitive task demanded by proverbs in general that drives listeners to negotiate the referential gap between the sign and

what it signifies (Saussure 2006: 46–49),[6] while attending to context. Table 7 illustrates the processing of José's proverb with this in mind.

Table 7. The two levels of linguistically-based referential signification in the processing of José's proverb

Concrete referent		Cognitive task and schema involved		Abstract referent
		LEVEL 1: Linking signs to significations Cognitive task: Reconfiguration of symbolic terms Schematic elements involved: • "God" culturally indexes "providence" • God provides blessings or "gifts" • Hat instantiates one of those gifts		
Hat	►	LEVEL 2: Generalizing from an instantiation Cognitive task: Abstract reasoning Schematic elements involved: • Identifying concrete referents (i.e., God, hats, the headless) • Noting referents' correspondence (i.e., God gives/provides; a hat is given; the headless receive) • Noting referents' (in)compatibility (i.e., gifts must be suitable in order to be useful; headless don't need hats) Abstract reasoning is involved in the processing of the concrete referents rendered in analogical form (a:b::c:d): God giving hats to **those who lack** a head is like giving things to **those who lack** nothing	►	Invitation (opportunity)

6 Saussure treats what I term as a "gap" between the sign and what the sign signifies as a dynamic tension that results from difference between signs and differences in meanings. In essence, he proposes that there isn't a constant one-to-one relationship between a signifier and its purported signified; instead, meaning is constantly negotiated on the basis of differentiation, or what Saussure calls the opposition and mutual-negation of signs in regard to each other; the idea that is attributed to a sign is the result of that process of differentiation. In thinking about the relationship between signifier and signified, I choose to refer to it as a "gap" so that meaning – in keeping with Bartlett's theory of schema – is thought of as conceptual approximations that result from the dynamic interaction of schematic elements. Such approximations, which are always culturally anchored, help to bridge the gap of uncertainty.

As I have been arguing, the proverb, as a discursive strategy, forces listeners to negotiate two levels of referential signification in order to reconcile the literal with the figurative. At the first level of referential signification, the linguistic relationship between the signifier and signified (the linking of a word with a concept) is attended to. At the second level, generalization from a concrete occurrence is achieved by virtue of analogical thinking (the signified of the linguistic relationship is linked to an abstraction – in this case by virtue of the ideational vehicle of "lacking").

In addition to the levels of linguistically-based signification, there is also a level of socially-based signification, wherein the speaker's rhetorical intention is attended to. The rhetorical intention is culturally situated in so far as each discursive community has its own communicative conventions (preferred ways of speaking), ideological foundations (values informing behavior and attitude), and a collective conceptual database (discrete, generally shared knowledge). The discernment of rhetorical intention is premised on recognizing how these various components inter-relate in a given situation.

Before considering the rhetorical intention, I will address the process of signification that the linguistic referents set in motion. In order to understand that the proverb alludes to an absurdity, the incompatibility of the two concrete referents (hats and the headless) must be acknowledged. What is more, the incompatibility of those two referents is the foundation for the abstraction that encapsulates the proverb's meaning: sometimes events or actions are not commensurate with desires and situations. The meaning of the proverb is thus based on the incompatibility that results from what is lacked. What is lacking in terms of the concrete referents is made clear: heads. What is not clear is what this concrete referent symbolizes at the abstract level. If the "hat" symbolizes the invitation or opportunity that the conversational context has fore-grounded, then the "heads" that are lacking symbolize that which would be a suitable complement for an invitation or opportunity: desire, will, or need. Additionally, the proverb implies that there are those who have a "head" and thus could use the "hat" or in abstract terms, there are those who have the will, desire, or need, and could use such an invitation or opportunity. The identification of the abstract referent allows us now to consider the rhetorical intention; that is, we can now consider why José chooses this form of expression.

José's utterance of the proverb sets him up as one of those people who presumably could use the invitation or opportunity that the conversation has fore-grounded, but given that self-interest is often in direct antagonism with collective interest, and therefore social solidarity, José's choice of the proverbial form veils his self-interest by hiding him among the many to which the proverb tacitly alludes. Given this intention, the proverb's indirectness and ambiguity

allow it to pass as a general statement, which in turn mollifies the individual antagonisms a more direct statement might otherwise reveal.

The absence of the social network members directly evaluated in the conversation makes the situation even more potentially fraught with danger of alienating those present, for José might be seen by his interlocutors as speaking out of turn. That José utters the proverb after María has established her position reveals an effective rhetorical strategy, one that uses a sanctioned antecedent as the foundation for subsequent commentary. The crucial factor in this strategy is that the proverb must be compatible with the antecedent (i.e., María's evaluation). The compatibility goes far in establishing the rapport of the group, for if José's commentary is rejected, its rejection is at least in part extended to the preceding comments upon which it was based. Thus the proverb goes a long way in establishing interlocutor rapport in this situation, as it finesses the potential problem of being too sincere with one's criticism by couching that critical position on the base of shared perception of the situation. The importance of establishing rapport in order to ensure sustained solidarity is also apparent in the following instance of proverb use.

El que es gallo, dondequiera canta

He who is a rooster, crows anywhere.

As several members of the network were gathered around the kitchen table of the López home in Chicago, Rodrigo, the eldest of the López siblings and the one who spent most of his life in Mexico, uttered the following proverb as a response to a comment concerning his ability to perform what to him would be an unfamiliar task: "*El que es gallo, donde quiera canta*" [He who is a rooster, crows anywhere].[7] The proverb conveys the notion that unfamiliar settings are immaterial to a person's ability to carry out any task if that person has an innate quality or skill that sets him apart from the rest. How is such an abstract generalization understood from such a pithy metaphoric expression? The speaker's social intention and the cognitive demands imposed by the proverb on the listeners combine to convey that generalization. In order to understand how this transformation of signification is reached, attention must be paid to

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7 This is a proverb variant by omission, as the common version is *El buen gallo dondequiera canta* [A good rooster crows anywhere]. The omission of the adjective did not seem to affect the interpretation that Rodrigo's interlocutors gave it. Nevertheless, it bears mentioning that had the adjective been included, its prominent positive evaluative semantic property would have made the message even less ambiguous.

the salient elements of the context in which the proverb was uttered, how the proverb was used, and why it was used.

The social context involved a family *plática* during which Rodrigo boasted that he could fix the squeaking brakes on his car. Considering that he was not a mechanic, his siblings half-jokingly warned him against making matters worse for himself. The group joked about the potential result of tampering with the brakes, and one of the siblings imagined that Rodrigo would be reduced to sticking his head out of the window of his car and yelling to people to move out of the way because he wouldn't be able to stop. This comical scenario evoked roaring laughter from the group, and Rodrigo defended himself by saying that they underestimated him. "*Soy gallo*" [I'm a rooster], he replied with a smile, "*y el que es gallo dondequiera canta*" [and he who is a rooster, crows anywhere]. The rest of the group punctuated his reply with a few interjections of admiration (e.g., "¡Órale!" [Woah!], "¡*'amonos*!" [Go on!]) and an approving, "there you have it, then," followed by more chuckles. Everyone remained in good spirits and continued the *plática* by moving on to another topic.

But in order to understand how the proverb confirmed a positive rapport between the interlocutors despite the overt criticism directed at Rodrigo, we must look at the components of the referential context as well as the social one. In terms of the referential context, the key figure in this proverb is the rooster. That is the subject of the action, and as such gains prominence in the expression. The listeners focus on this prominent component and draw from their culturally-specific (i.e., conventional) schema tied to that object. In this case, the figurative expression is particularly striking because the proverb relies on the Mexican culture's common association of the rooster, or cock, with bravery, pride, and confidence – characteristics that are so valued and attributed to these animals that they capture the imagination and fuel the interest in the nationally-accepted pastime of cock-fighting. These characteristics are addressed in part by the English term "cockiness," but whereas this latter term usually carries a negative connotation in English, the use of this term in Spanish carries a positive connotation for Mexicans. Moreover, many cultures – but particularly the culture of the Mexican countryside (i.e., *rancheros*[8]) – associate bravery, pride, confidence, and constancy/reliability with an ideal masculinity. The choice of the rooster as an indexical figure for these traits plausibly stems from the animal's characteristic traits (e.g., territoriality, aggressiveness, colorful plumage, ponderous gait). In addition, roosters are also associated with constancy and reliability because of their invariable crowing at dawn. The recognition of these characteristics – preceded by the notion that the statement has to be recognized as a figurative

8 For further information on *ranchero* culture, see Farr (2006).

expression (because it would otherwise seem nonsensical) – drives the listeners to formulate an interpretation. That is, their understanding is informed by the reconfiguration of symbolic terms.

In order for the listeners to draw the meaning considered above, they had to reconfigure the symbolic terms that comprised the proverb. The listeners had to access their mental repository for the characteristics of roosters in general (i.e., their schema of the referent) and then reconfigure them so that they would apply to human traits and activities. The listeners then had to consider *what* this reconfiguration communicated (i.e., that the speaker was self-assured, brave, and constant in light of adversity) and then formulate an abstract generalization from a very specific observation (i.e., true roosters crow anywhere) in order to apply that observation to their immediate situation.

Thus we see that the message itself is encapsulated in the mental associations that are *culturally specific* to this discourse community. The listeners had to be familiar with the conventional associations that the figurative expression relied on in order to convey the message it did. These associations were, in turn, culturally embedded, and that is the reason that this proverb would probably not communicate the same things to people who were unfamiliar with the cultural information detailed here. Moreover, the listeners had to mentally process that cultural information in a way that would allow them to see the connections between an apparently unrelated observation about crowing roosters and the challenge to one of the interlocutors about his ability to carry out a particular task. In order to see this connection, the listeners had to engage in at least three cognitive tasks: (1) the reconfiguration of symbolic terms (i.e., consider how "rooster" represented [human] qualities instead of an actual farm animal); (2) comparative thinking (i.e., consider how their immediate concern – whether the speaker could or could not perform a task – compared to the observation encapsulated in the proverb); and (3) abstract reasoning (i.e., draw generalizations from particulars).

Rather than engage in an explicit, and presumably factual, description of the characteristics that would make the speaker of the proverb successful in the activities he claims he can perform, and which his interlocutors cast doubt on, Rodrigo selects a conventional genre of expression (i.e., proverbs) to argue his case. On this particular occasion the other network members chuckled at the expression, not in derision but in enjoyment of the witty response, and the fact that Rodrigo was not further challenged about his ability to perform the task in question attests to the effectiveness of the rhetorical strategy he implemented. That is, Rodrigo could have outlined a plan for successfully completing the task others considered him incapable of doing successfully, or he could have defended himself by mentioning in detail the mechanical wherewithal he considered he

had, but instead he used a time-honored metaphorical expression to persuade his interlocutors. This placed his interlocutors in the position of challenging the time-honored wisdom of the proverb if they continued to challenge Rodrigo. What is more, Rodrigo's self-identification with the rooster of the proverb served to tacitly transfer the positive qualities found in the rooster-schema to himself, and this, in turn, functioned psychologically as the listing of qualifications for carrying out the task. Another element that invokes persuasion is the proverb's pithiness. The proverb is an economical way to express complex ideas in an easily digestible package. By calling on a proverb to communicate an idea, the speaker's argument is presented in a concise manner that mentally involves the listeners and gets them to engage with the speaker's argument; this tends to reduce the listeners' chances for dissent by reducing the time to engage in counter argument in real-time conversation. For these reasons, Rodrigo's rhetorical strategy proves to be effective and well accepted by his interlocutors; and it is this acceptance that underscores the power of proverbs to establish a positive rapport among interlocutors precisely when the issues the proverbs are called on to address may be of a divisive nature.

4.6. Using proverbs to entertain

Rodrigo's proverb and his voicing of it direct us to consider the aesthetic aspect of proverbs even if this feature is not strictly speaking a social function. Proverbs, like other verbal art, prove engaging and entertaining because their communicative particularity rests on the paradoxical subversion of the conventional communicative pattern while relying on the conventionality of a shared cultural and linguistic background and repertoire for understanding. Oral traditions such as proverbs, riddles, and jokes can be thought of as verbal art because they alter the conventional form of most messages. Verbal art foregrounds an alternate system of communication that temporarily subverts or displaces the conventional one, and this forces listeners to switch their communicative frame from the "utilitarian frame," as Pepicello and Green (1984: 5) refer to it, to the performative frame (Bauman 1977; Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73).

That is, verbal art engages the listeners by having them complete the message, rather than simply receiving it *in toto*. The presentation of the analogy implicit in the proverb forces the listener to reconcile the immediate factual context with the general figurative one. Yet, it is the use of [metaphorical] analogy to communicate something that could otherwise be said plainly that suggests the initial aspect of shift from the utilitarian mode of language to the artistic mode. The shift to an artistic modality, in terms of language use, calls into effect a performative stance

on the part of the speaker, and this shift is often recognized by the interlocutors serving as audience when the latter recognize the conventional clues for the interpretation of the message, or what Bateson (1972) termed "metamessages" (indicators, precursors, or traits that guide the audience's interpretation of the ensuing or accompanying message). These metamessages, in effect, constitute the "frame" that helps identify how a message should be construed. In terms of verbal art, Bauman (1975) identifies the following as some of the framing devices or metamessages that help us recognize when an utterance is to be interpreted as verbal performance: conventional openings and closings, use of figurative language, special prosodic patterns, stylistic devices such as rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, appeals to the audience, and physical gestures (as cited in Pepicello and Green 1984: 8–9).

The combination of poetic aspects (e.g. imagery, tropes, prosody) with a performative communicative frame that is highly dependent on its particular context gives rise to the novelty of language that engages the listener. Linguistic innovation is defined in relation to the systematic, predictable, and conventional quality of most linguistic expressions and communicative patterns. Rodrigo's choice of proverbs earns him his interlocutors' appreciation in part because it involves the novelty of performance and poetry. The imagery involved in the proverb, the parallelism of its text, the pertinence of the expression's figurative meaning, and the non-conflictive yet defensive function of the utterance are all innovative expressive features. In many other occasions, the network demonstrated appreciation for speakers who used proverbs that were not often heard, or uttered proverbs that were familiar but which were recalled with expert timing and were exquisitely pertinent. Proverbs proved to be more engaging for the network when the particularity of the context was evident, but we can see that the appreciation for proverbs in general is not limited to *in situ* use. In order to gauge the alluring nature of proverbs and their use, a person needs only to consider that although the ancient Sumerians were probably the first to fashion a collection of proverbs, they were certainly not the last, and today there are numerous publications of proverb collections, or *refraneros*, all over the world.

4.7. The impact of proverb use on behavior

The complexity of proverb use can only be assessed in light of the complexity of the social, cultural, and cognitive structures involved in the act of uttering and understanding proverbs themselves. Proverbs hold the paradoxical quality of using the concrete and particular to express the general and abstract, and this shows that oral traditions, as opposed to being simple formulas given to

rote memorization, involve complex higher order cognitive skills that are fundamental to many human endeavors. One ubiquitous human endeavor is the maintenance and communication of shared social values and behaviors. The examination of proverb use among this *mexicano* social network reveals how this endeavor is met in part, but usually on a daily basis, through the use of this oral genre.

The use of proverbs to argue, to advise, to unite, and to entertain reveals that proverbs are generally employed as socializing tools by members of the López social network. In fact, the subtlety of the presentation of values communicated through proverbs is in itself a reflection of a social value: discretion. That is, proverbs often function as an indirect way of criticizing something or someone who is not adhering to prescribed social mores or values. The fact that the criticism is impersonal, by virtue of attributing authority to a collective or absent entity (e.g., "people say" "as the elders said" "as someone said") who cannot be immediately challenged, allows the speaker of the proverb to not assume responsibility for the criticism. This rhetorical strategy keeps the speaker from becoming the target of any ill feelings that the criticism may evoke in the addressee. That is how the speaker of the criticism is protected individually for the sake of the collective good. If the receivers of the proverb are to understand the intended meaning of the same, then they must go through the process of decoding its analogical structure as it relates to their context; this participation in the criticism reinforces the message that the criticism is founded on shared social expectations and not exclusively on the personal judgment of the speaker.

Comparably, the intended targets of the proverb can save face (Brown and Levinson 1978) by allowing the indirect and generalizing nature of the proverb to remain a general lesson, if they so choose, instead of seeing it as a particular one aimed only at one person – namely, themselves. Thus, the prominence of a single person's flaw is reduced and the addressee is given the option of interpreting the use of a given proverb as less of an open attack on his or her character and more of a general opportunity to share in the values of the community.

Thus, the relationships between interlocutors, as well as the object of communication, determine in great part why and how an oral tradition is actualized. By using proverbs that make reference to desired social values and behavior, interpersonal relations, and the participants' place of origin, the network members continually recreate a culturally specific social environment for themselves in their village of origin and abroad.

In addition, this particular case shows how figurative statements, such as proverbs rooted in every-day conversations, manifest the nexus of the cognitive and the social. That is, the understanding of the metaphorical base of proverbs involves higher order cognitive skills whose task is the integration of particu-

lar conceptual items with abstract social behaviors – and this is mediated via linguistic conventions and/or practices.

It is through proverbs, along with many other forms of socialization not covered here due to the scope of this study, that network members acquire an awareness of the cultural particulars that, generally speaking, govern their social behavior. The communication of shared social values via proverbs makes manifest how solidarity foundations are often laid through the use of a particular oral genre.

Chapter 5
Toward praxis: Linking the saying with the thinking

5.1. Stigmatizing those who use proverbs

According to social historian James Obelkevich (1987), the idea that proverbs are indicative of mental and communicative sophistication is something not commonly accepted in contemporary American society. In a society's shunning of a particular discursive mode, Obelkevich suggests, we can read a shift in social values. In particular, the rejection of proverbs stands as a rejection of traditional attitudes and modes of thinking in favor of a modern sensibility that champions the importance of individuality and originality. As he says:

> [Proverbs] put the collective before the individual, the recurrent and stereotyped before the unique, external rules before self-determination, common sense before the individual vision. . . .educated people make the further assumption that everyone has (or should have) their own unique, ever-changing experience of life, and that that experience should be expressed in freshly chosen words on every occasion. To use proverbs would deny the individuality of both speaker and listener. In this view, those who do use proverbs are either linguistically lazy or lacking originality, their poverty of language reflecting poverty of experience and poverty of imagination. (Obelkevich 1987: 65)

According to Obelkevich, collective social values are reflected in the discursive modes that are sanctioned or rejected in common interaction. It is an observation that resonates with Sabean's (1984: 29–30) claim to the importance of discourse in the formation of a community, and which is reflected in the popularity or unpopularity of something like proverb use as a discursive strategy. If we accept, for instance, that proverb use maintains its popularity on the basis of its appeals to shared perspective and experiential constancy, then we must also consider that a decline in that popularity is indicative of a rise in values that render those appeals incompatible with a prevailing sensibility. So that when reliance on a collective, anonymous, and indirect authority is not valued, but, indeed, replaced by such values as innovation, individuality, and transparency, we can expect to see the waning of proverb use because a large part of its foundational values are no longer embraced.

At first glance, the claim that implicit social values are the subtext of discursive practices hardly seems momentous, but Obelkevich's closing observation of how proverb users are evaluated in a society that doesn't appreciate that discur-

sive strategy tells us otherwise. In such an observation, we see how the incompatibility of discursive strategies can very easily lead to unfair social evaluations, social evaluations that become part of the cultural complex that is continuously being fashioned and renewed in the collective consciousness. The importance of discourse, awareness of its uses and evaluations, is therefore suddenly compounded by the very real and immediate effects discursive practices have in our lives. For instance, when proverbs are characterized as parroted expressions, that characterization invokes a negative evaluation of the proverb-user's intellect and general sophistication; something that will complicate a person's life solely on the basis of a preferred discursive strategy.

Certainly the view that Obelkevich describes is based on particular social values that do not translate entirely either across cultures or across generations, but the very notion that two of the characteristics that make proverbs recognizable as proverbs – mainly that their origin is anonymous and that they serve to communicate a general idea – has also led to their rejection attests to the importance of social context and perspective in the assessment of discursive practices across communities.

In regard to proverbs, the data presented in the previous chapter gives an indication of how cognitively demanding this form of communication is. Additionally, proverbs are expressions that are surrounded by paradoxes:

– proverbs are pithy expressions that make reference to the concrete in order to encapsulate the abstract
– the origin of any given proverb is generally obscure, but instead of undermining it, that obscurity of origin grants it authority by advancing it as collectively constructed and socially sanctioned wisdom
– proverbs are also seen as common expressions that everyone knows, but it is commonly accepted that few people have the linguistic and social skills to know when and how to apply them exceptionally well in conversation
– finally, although their form is static (that is, the words and structure of the expression resist change), their meanings could be in continuous flux depending on the interpretation that they are given as a result of particular social factors and settings

These paradoxical traits immediately begin to dismantle the characterization of proverbs as pedestrian (if not boorish) expressions by virtue of indicating a communicative and ideational complexity that requires considerable acumen to negotiate.

In fact, the proverb data presented here show that language, higher-order cognitive skills, and social factors are inextricably entangled in the processing of figurative expressions. In addition, the primarily oral nature of these expressions

argues against notions that in the absence of literacy, the oral medium of communication limits people's capacity for complex abstract thought and metalinguistic awareness (viz., Havelock 1982: 7–8; Bizzell and Herzberg 2001: 20). The preceding chapter's examination of proverb use in context has allowed us to see how the López social network makes sense of and (re)affirms and (re)constructs, in part, those systems of meaning that hold it together, and this tells us that much of the complexity surrounding proverbs is based not only on the reasoning skills that are involved in their processing but also on the complex chains of socio-historical knowledge trailing the referents in culturally-specific associations.

By recognizing that instead of being merely parroted expressions proverbs are complex forms of expression that require contextual knowledge and higher-order reasoning skills, we recognize that particular social contexts and universal cognitive processes can be seen as equally important and simultaneous components in the meaning-making enterprise of everyday and exceptional uses of language – regardless of whether those uses are exclusively oral or print-base. In fact, this observation concerning the interdependence of social context and cognitive skills not only tells us that we must stop considering oral forms of communication as less intellectually demanding than written modes, but it also tells us that teaching of writing can benefit from the consideration of the synthesis of the cognitive and social dimensions of language as proposed here. That is, given that an oral tradition, such as the proverb, involves higher order thinking skills, this knowledge can guide us to a reconsideration of the apparent gap between orality and literacy that was cultivated in the last twenty years and regularly resurfaces in popular discourse. This claim is based on the observation that the higher-order cognitive skills that are employed in the processing of proverbs (e.g., generalization based on abstract reasoning, comparative thinking, metalinguistic awareness, and metacognition) are also the prime target of most writing composition and reading comprehension tasks.

5.2. Innate or learned? Both: Language acquisition and language use reveal the nexus of the cognitive and the social

Gleitman and Newport's (1995) observations on language acquisition present a suitable parallel for the idea of a socio-cognitive nexus in language processing. In the process of reviewing the evidence for the presence of an innate element in language acquisition, Gleitman and Newport distinguish between language ability, which is innate, and language acquisition, which is learned. That is,

much of language learning at a pre-adult level is evidently an endogenous process more so than an exogenous one. Rather than learning a new language by virtue of exposure and repetition alone, preverbal children reflect an unconscious mastery of complex linguistic patterns without having possibly been exposed to all of them by the age at which they have mastered them. It is evident that we acquire the grammar of our first language without knowing what grammar is or having been exposed to all the possible variations that that grammar allows in any particular linguistic system.

For example, a three-year-old child can construct a question, "What did cookie monster eat?" out of the statement "Cookie monster ate cake" without ever being told that the object of the declarative sentence must be replaced by the interrogative pronoun *what* that must then be relocated to the front of the sentence and be followed by an inflected form of the auxiliary verb *do* which thus renders the tense marking by the original verb of the sentence unnecessary. That a child can relatively easily and unconsciously master the grammatical feat diagrammed in Figure 5, and others like it, suggests a biological basis for language acquisition.

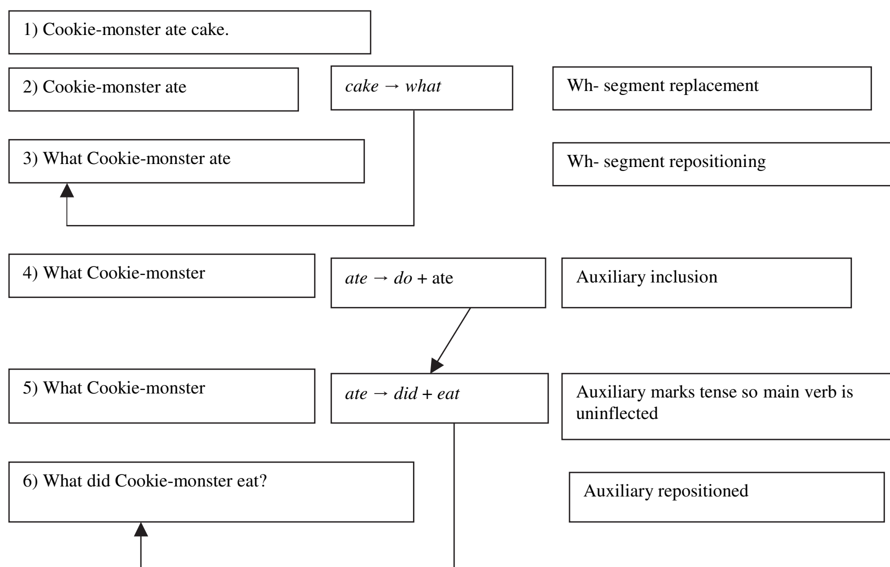

Figure 5. Cognitive tasks involved in the transformation of a declarative sentence into an interrogative one

Just as it is clear, however, that there is no one particular innate language (we all learn the language spoken by the family into which we are born, rather than a

primordial language that gets discarded after infancy), it is also clear that there has to be exposure to some language in order for our biological predisposition to use language to engage and enable our linguistic development to take its course. Thus, we reach the synthesis of an innate disposition toward language use (which negates the idea of the mind being a *tabula rasa* at birth) and the importance of socio-environmental influence on cognitive development.

Gleitman and Newport (1995) speak of these two factors in regard to language learning and its impact on cognitive development by pointing to the documented evidence of the lack of cognitive development in children who are deprived of linguistic stimulus during crucial developmental stages. The three cases of complete language-deprivation that Gleitman and Newport summarize involve children who are exposed to language late in their developmental stages. One six year old child who had never been spoken to was found to be at the cognitive developmental level of a 2-year-old, but upon being exposed to linguistic stimulus for a year, the child attained the level of linguistic sophistication and intelligence of her age peers. In another case, a thirteen year old who had been isolated since the age of 20 months did learn to articulate rudimentary phrases such as “Another house have dog” and “No more take wax,” but “she never progressed beyond this stage to complex sentences or the acquisition of the function words [e.g., words that serve grammatical functions (e.g., prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliaries, pronouns, articles) more so than ideational ones, (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs)] that characterize the normal 3- and 4-year olds’ speech” (11–12). Finally, a deaf woman who was not diagnosed as such until she was an adult and who lived the first thirty one years of her life without sign language or speech training, made less progress in her language acquisition than the children of the first two cases. The woman acquired “a sizable vocabulary” and was able to form multiword utterances, but the latter lacked “even the rudimentary aspects of grammatical structure found in [those of the language-deprived 13-year-old]” (12). The woman would say for example, “Breakfast eating girl,” and “Banana the eat.”[1] Based on these cases, Gleitman and Newport conclude – and thus support Lenneberg’s *critical age hypothesis* – that “there appears to be a critical or sensitive period for language acquisition, a consequence of maturational changes in the developing human brain” (12). This suggests that human beings are not only innately capable of learning language but that the exposure to language is an indispensable catalyst, and a determining

1 Gleitman and Newport (1995) do not make the observation that the examples they provide of the types of phrases uttered by the woman in this case, and which they characterize as absent of rudimentary grammatical structure, are simply syntactically reversed. That is, when the utterances are read from right to left, they conform perfectly to the rules of English syntax.

factor, in successful cognitive development at particular stages. This is to say not only that there is a biological basis at the heart of language acquisition, but also that capacity for language acquisition needs to be activated by socio-linguistic interaction at crucial developmental stages.

As reported by Restak (2001), the apparent paradox that language is both innate and learned from the environment is supported by research in brain development conducted by Pat Kuhl of the University of Washington, in Seattle. Kuhl compared the ability of Japanese and American infants to distinguish between the /r/ and /l/ phonemes, and found that they responded equally well at the age of six months. By the age of 12 months, however, the Japanese children had lost this ability. Given that the phoneme /l/ is not recognized in the Japanese language, the explanation offered by Kuhl is that "language input sculpts the brain to create a perceptual system that highlights the contrasts used in the language, while de-emphasizing those that do not, and this happens *prior* to word learning. The change in phonetic perception thus assists in word learning, rather than the reverse" (as quoted in Restak 2001: 38–41; emphasis in the original).

We can thus begin to understand how biological and social factors play an equally balanced role in language acquisition. Our brains may be biologically equipped for the use of language, but it is the acquisition of language that sculpts our brains into highly efficient meaning-making centers. That efficiency appears to rest on the process of "strengthening and pruning" of neuronal (brain cell) connections, which involves the maintenance of appropriate neuronal connections and the elimination of redundant and inactive ones (Restak 2001: 18, 39), which is to say that if our environment does not require the use of a particular mental connection, that connection is lost, despite the initial biological predisposition. What this suggests for linguistic concerns is that although the languages of the world share a basic foundation (e.g., general phonemic, morphemic, and syntactic patterning; particular universal items such as nouns and verbs) and that we have the biological wherewithal to successfully build on that foundation, the functions of particular languages may differ enough across cultures to effect a marked difference in what can be part of our linguistic repertoire by virtue of influencing the neuronal networks that constitute the language centers of the brain.

One crucial stage of brain development is the formation of a complex network of neuronal connections. Each neuron has many dendrites, which extend like the branches of a tree, and are potential terminals of reception for connection to other neurons. These connections are greatly influenced by environmental stimuli. The environmental influence on inter-neuronal connection is particularly evident in infant cerebral development, but recent therapeutic work with stroke victims shows that the brain maintains a plasticity in relation to environmen-

tal stimuli that extends well into old age.[2] In terms of brain development and function, cognitive abilities and intelligence are associated with inter-neuronal connections more than with brain size (i.e., the number of neurons that make up the brain), so that given this consideration the significance of environmental influence on neuronal connections takes on an added dimension (Restak 2001: 8).

The work of Kuhl on the impact of linguistic stimuli on brain development and the observations made by Gleitman and Newport begin to show us that environmental influence is as crucial as genetic factors in regard to brain development. Once we recognize this and acknowledge that cognitive abilities hinge on particular mental development at the level of neuronal connections, and that these in turn are reinforced or weakened in light of environmental stimuli, we can say that particular linguistic features have a direct effect on mental discernment.

Given this information, it is reasonable to assert that the research in language acquisition and brain development lead to a theoretical model that reconciles the biological foundation with the environmental one, and that this must drive cognitivists and social-constructionists exploring language issues to consider the two domains not in contention with each other but in conjunction.

5.3. Revisiting the role of context in meaning making

Having established that language acquisition involves a biological basis and an environmental one, and that language acquisition has an impact on brain development at the neuronal level, we can think of linguistic communication as the synthesis of the biological and the social, rather than as the exclusive product of one or the other. Just as the evidence shows that we are innately prepared for language use, the existence of neurons that are ready to make a network of mental pathways for the assimilation of environmental input at the time of birth suggests that we are born with the tools to carry out complex mental connections or reasoning. But having the rudimentary foundation for carrying out mental connections is not enough – there has to be a stimulus that guides those connections; that is, we have to be shown, in keeping with the analogy, how

2 Restak (2001: 181–183) reports that stroke victims following the constraint-induced therapy pioneered by Edward Taub at the University of Alabama at Birmingham can regain the function of paralyzed limbs. Taub explains that the basis for this recovery is the unaffected neurons' ability to "behave like plants and send out elements that make connections with other neurons" and thus enable the reactivation of the neuron-limb connection severed by the stroke.

to use the tools we are born with. That is where the social factors of language use come in.

The environment provides the stimulus for super-structural mental development. It is, in effect, the social context in which we acquire language that sets some of the parameters and limits for our mental development. Assuming that we have an innate ability to carry out sophisticated mental tasks such as generalizations, inference, and comparisons just as we have an innate ability to acquire language, it can be hypothesized that just as we need exposure to language to bring language mastery to fruition we also need contextual (i.e., social) factors to refine and hone our rudimentary reasoning skills. That is, social, linguistic, and physical factors condition our use of those mental tools; they teach us when to generalize, how to generalize, and about what things we can generalize and about which we cannot.

The influence of social, linguistic, and physical factors on our perception is another way of conceiving the process of contextualization. The environment gives us the parameters that guide the mental connections that enable what we recognize as types of reasoning. When the contextual parameters are not clear, or a person lacks the mental wherewithal to follow a particular line of reasoning, communication fails. This is clearly seen in the use of proverbs to test schizophrenic patients and mental development in children. In both cases, most of those tested are unable to glean the abstract message of a given proverb because they fail to recognize the function of its symbols. The schizophrenics are unable to do it due to mental impairment, but young children are unable to do it because of a lack of conceptual knowledge (they don't know what the referents are) or discursive knowledge (they don't know what function the conventional form serves). But unlike schizophrenics, children with a healthy brain are capable of performing analogical reasoning to glean a message from an ambiguous statement such as a proverb. There is evidence suggesting that if analogical reasoning is not innate, it is at least one of the first cognitive abilities we acquire. For instance, children as young as 9 months of age have been shown to attribute an abstract relational basis to stimuli that are perceptually unrelated, such as sound and image. Using the common method of measuring "looking time" to gauge pre-verbal children's interest in particular stimuli, one experiment showed that infants paired the image of a broken line with a pulsating sound and a solid line with a continuous sound more often than not. The researchers concluded that such pairing revealed that the infants were pairing the two stimuli on the basis of relational similarity such as continuity/discontinuity rather than physical similarity (Goswami 1992: 101). Similarly, pre-verbal children have displayed the use of relational similarity to draw inferences about physical events, such as predicting the size of hidden objects, predicting the effect of barriers

on moving objects, and predicting the displacement of objects after a collision (Goswami 1992: 104–110).

While such experiments show that analogical reasoning – that based on recognizing a shared, or relational, feature between the objects considered – is a fundamental component of human cognition, they also show that analogical reasoning is linked to conceptual knowledge. So that when small children assume, for instance, that plants aren't alive, they do so commonly under the relational assumption that plants don't display the features that children have learned to attribute to living things (e.g., motion, food-intake, sensory organs, etc.), but this lack of conceptual knowledge does not mean that they are not engaging in the cognitive skill of analogical reasoning.

In contrast, most schizophrenics, according to Benjamin (1944) – even those suffering mild cases of schizophrenia (i.e., those who are able to speak coherently, remain focused on the conversation, and are not constantly immersed in delusional episodes) – display an inability to engage in analogical reasoning because they can't engage in the reconfiguration of symbolic terms (the process of "desymbolization" in Benjamin's terms), and hence display only a literal understanding of proverbs (81).[3]

The differing underlying reasons behind the similar responses of these two groups to fundamentally analogical expressions such as proverbs tells us of the importance of the simultaneous interaction of biological and social (i.e., contextual) factors to effect appropriate cognitive activity that leads to successful communication.

The development of appropriate cognitive activity has two bases then: the biological, which is the ability of a healthy brain to engage in the mental process of generalization, the formulation of inferences, and comparative thinking; and the social, which is the guidance afforded in context to harness these thought processes. It is here that we return to the importance of contextualization as a quintessential social endeavor that affords – if not conditions – understanding of figurative expressions. Since the perception of contextualization cues involves sophisticated mental connections, it seems certain that although normal human beings are born with the capacity to engage in the sophisticated mental exercises needed to process a complex linguistic genre such as the proverb, there have to be guidelines to follow in order to learn to apply those abilities. Jakobson (1960: 353), in regard to language in general, and Bauman and Briggs (1990:

3 It is important to note, however, that Andreasen's (1977) evaluation of the use of proverbs as a diagnostic tool for mental status confirms its validity but also reveals a low degree of reliability because shared standards for proverb interpretation have not been developed.

68–69), in regard to the process of contextualization, consider the necessity of saliency of communicative elements to serve as the guides for focusing attention (i.e., thought) in order to glean a desired (i.e., intended) message. The lack of guidelines in the focusing of attention (i.e., the mental connections that a speaker wishes a listener to make) leads us to echo Bauman and Briggs' objection to the over-extension of context in every situation; that is, how can a message be efficiently communicated – if at all – when there is no limit as to what is pertinent in relation to an utterance? In regard to the successful processing of figurative expressions, such as the proverb, the importance of contextual information becomes paramount because the expression jettisons explicitness for the sake of efficiency in expressing such things as social intentions, authority, representation of self, (re)affirmation of values, affinities, sensitivities, and even patterns of reasoning. So that in relation to the processing of proverbs, the influence of the context in which they are presented and the elements they index considerably determine the meanings assigned to them. Therefore what we see in the relationship between social context and figurative language is that cognitive processes and social factors interact in such a way that neither can be considered responsible for understanding to the exclusion of the other.

If in the previous chapter we discussed how particular cultural details guide the listeners of some Spanish proverbs to particular understandings, and how proverbs were used by the López social network to effect particular social aims, now we can turn to examples of English proverbs to further illustrate how conventional understandings are so deeply embedded in socio-cultural conventions that we often fail to see how they could be understood differently by people who are unaware of those conventions. By looking at the following English proverbs, whose meaning is particularly tied to their social context and conventional associations, we can further emphasize that cognitive ability alone cannot lead to the understanding of proverbs – or other similar discursive practices founded on what is culturally commonplace and conventional.

The proverb "Every cloud has a silver lining" is commonly used to mean that something that is perceived to be negative might, in fact, harbor a positive attribute. In terms of proverb instantiation (i.e., when/how it is applied), the proverb is often employed when the occurrence of a negative event may lead someone to think that nothing good will come of it, only to find later that had it not been for said event an ensuing beneficial outcome would not have occurred. This understanding, however, is based on the recognition of the conventional association of "a cloud" with something negative. Clouds are associated with aspects of weather phenomena that are generally perceived as negative: rain, storms, thunder, lightning, and lower temperatures. Traditionally, these meteorological phenomena have been used as tropes to communicate feelings of

despair, gloom, depression, and foreboding to name a few. These associations – by applying the G. B. Milner approach to proverb characterization described by Dundes (1981: 47–50) – establish the initial component of the proverb's -/+ semantic structure. The second component, the positive one, is communicated through the association of the precious metal "silver" with positive qualities or, in keeping with our instantiation, good outcomes. The value of the precious metal communicates its positive quality and thus the two components are set in opposition but reconciled by placing one within the other (the metaphorical expression leads us to understand that there is something positive in something negative):

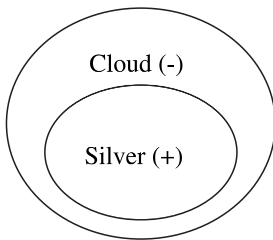

Figure 6. Conventional value-laden interpretation of the proverb "every cloud has a silver lining"

The understanding illustrated in Figure 6 breaks down, however, when the initial component of the proverb (i.e., the cloud) is not associated with a negative feature. It is plausible that people who have learned to associate clouds with positive attributes will not reach this understanding for this proverb. For instance, people who are native to arid lands where scorching heat waves occur regularly might very well have positive feelings toward clouds precisely for the same reasons that other groups based in ecologically different settings might have negative feelings toward them. What is more, the people who have learned to associate clouds with positive qualities will not reach the initial understanding of the proverb precisely because their efforts to carry out a process of inference would lead them to a logically redundant proposition: there is something positive in something positive. If members of the group that harbors positive feelings toward clouds heard this proverb in regard to a recently suffered mishap, it is unlikely that they would think it logical to connect their negative sense of the mishap with their positive sense of the clouds.

Interestingly, the Spanish equivalent to this English proverb is *No hay mal que por bien no venga* [There is no bad (thing) that doesn't come for some good (reason)]. The -/+ structure of the proverb is unambiguous. The first half of the construction clearly establishes the negative quality by using the word

mal (wrong/bad), and the second half equally explicitly mentions the word *bien* (good), so that the message is clearer even if it is not as colorful (i.e., lacks the creative aspect of the metaphor) as the English version. This shows that not all proverbs are as dependent on contextual and background information as others, but it appears that the more metaphorically loaded the proverbs are, the more likely they are to be culturally bound because the associations required for identification of the embedded analogy might be unique only to the particular social groups that use them. To illustrate this further, here is another example.

The proverb "fair in the cradle, foul in the saddle" may not only be completely cryptic to people unfamiliar with any aspect of horse-riding equipment but also to those who know what a saddle is but are too far removed in time and space from the elements that invest this proverb with meaning. The aspect of being "fair" in the sense of being beautiful in the cradle is easily discernible because it calls infants to mind, who are, in turn, often associated with attractive traits such as innocence, purity, delicateness, and tenderness, to name a few. In contrast, the underlying notion of a bad appearance on a saddle is not quite as evident. Certainly, when we begin to unpack the iconographic details of the image of an adult person on a saddle – and by extension (i.e., cognitive elaboration) the role of a person upon a horse – we begin to make assumptions. The first is probably that of being of age to sit upon a saddle, which introduces the notion of adulthood, which is, in turn, counterpoised to the initial element of infancy. The second assumption – at least in North America – might easily be that the iconographic image of adult on horseback is that of a cowboy. So that once the process of associations have led to the identification of a suitable referent given the "clues" (i.e., culturally recognizable but mutually-independent elements) the underlying idea of being "foul in the saddle" can be understood to mean that although during infancy a person is beautiful, once in adulthood, that person is repulsive. But why should this be the prevalent image of an adult person? Herein lies the initial source of confusion for those who are not familiar with the potential origin of the proverb. If we assume that the proverb originated among a people familiar with the cowboys of U.S. lore, then we begin to understand that the beauty of a baby in a cradle is counterpoised to that of a man on saddle in that they are diametrically opposed in defining traits. In U.S. lore, the American cowboy is generally admired for his horsemanship, but another salient line of associations depicts cowboys as tough, crude, violent and generally unrefined – many of the characteristics probably expected of frontiersmen ostensibly preoccupied with their survival in the wilderness instead of the social graces. Hence, the notion of beauty evident in the innocence and purity associated with a person during infancy is said to be lost by the time the person reaches adulthood, and these two extremes are conveyed metonymically through the images of a cradle

and a saddle. The culturally-specific aspect of the proverb, however, is that the negative traits of adulthood are communicated through a particular profession: being a cowboy. This culture-specific image of being a cowboy enables the understanding of the proverb in the general sense of diametrical oppositions mediated by a given factor, in this case, by age.

There are, of course, proverbs that translate across cultures readily. The reason might be that there are such things as universal metaphors, such as "an empty stomach" used to communicate "hunger," and "tear drops" to communicate "deeply felt emotion," or a "closed mouth" to communicate "reticence." The probability of this phenomenon is particularly supported by the works of Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 45–59) and Grady (1997) which advance the idea of primary conceptual metaphor. Primary conceptual metaphors are mental representations of subjective experience informed by sensorial experience. One of the examples discussed by Lakoff and Johnson (1999) to unpack this notion is the common metaphor of "grasping" to equate "understanding." They say that the sensorimotor experience of "grasping" is the basis for representing to ourselves what it means to understand an abstract concept such as "understanding." The concept of "understanding" is represented in our minds by virtue of an iconic relationship to the physical experience of "grasping." Given that the sensorimotor experience came first in the course of our development, the metaphor for the abstract concept is built on it. This is not to say that this is the only metaphor used to conceptualize the abstract notion of "understanding," but it is interesting to consider that there is evidence that this metaphor translates across cultures in regard to this referent (e.g., consider Archimedes's famous Greek exclamation *[h]eureka* "I have found it" – and its implicit claim of possession – used to communicate the notion of conceiving an idea or reaching understanding; and the Latin word *comprehendere* – which means "to seize" – being the root word of "comprehension," which is a synonym of understanding and its cognates in several other Romance languages).

In contrast to the idea of conceptual metaphor, Honeck's (1997: 44) hypothesis of "cognitive ideals" is problematic even though it generally addresses the same issue of mental representation by also claiming an underlying cross-cultural universal base that gives rise to particular (i.e., culture specific) metaphors. The cognitive ideals hypothesis assumes that there is the existence of universal ideal states of being. That is, the hypothesis is based on the idea that all peoples have as part of their mental repertoire the concept of perfection, so that human judgment of the world and the experiences within it are measured in relation to the deviation from an ideal standard. This, of course, remains an assumption. Lakoff and Johnson (1999), on the other hand, propose a theory of metaphor that is not based on universal concepts or ideal states per se, but

on the neurological basis of experience (what can be thought of as “cognitive mapping”) that serves to order and inform our perception of the world through our natural ability to think analogically.

Thus, the argument presented here that the biological and the social are inseparable in any examination of complex thinking skills is particularly supported by two of the four theories that comprise Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) integrated theory of primary metaphor: Johnson’s (1999) *theory of conflation in the course of learning* and Narayanan’s *neural theory of metaphor*. Johnson’s *theory of conflation* proposes that as infants we conflate our “subjective (nonsensorimotor) experiences and judgments” with our sensorimotor experiences to the point of undifferentiation. This means that our initial conceptual understanding of the world around us is mediated by our physical perception of it and the two remain indistinguishable until we learn to think abstractly (i.e., to differentiate). For example, a child’s “subjective experience of affection is typically correlated with the sensory experience of warmth, the warmth of being held” and this association typically persists and “lead[s] the same infant, later in life, to speak of ‘a warm smile,’” among other metaphorically-based expressions that conflate abstract concepts with physical properties or sensations (as summarized in Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 46). Narayanan’s (1997) neural theory of metaphor grounds the theory of conflation in physiological processes by claiming that “the ‘associations’ made during the period of conflation are realized neurally in simultaneous activations that result in permanent neural connections being made across the neural networks that define conceptual domains” (as summarized in Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 46). This process of neural networking, according to recent research in brain development is extensive, with each neuron making “as many as 10,000 connections to other nerve cells in the brain. . . [so that] while sharing common features, each brain’s development pattern is unique. As a result, no two brains are exactly alike” (Restak 2001: 3). Thus it becomes clear that if environmental stimuli influence the neuronal connections that are the foundation of our cognitive patterns, then our reasoning and general thinking patterns are also, at a fundamental level, influenced by our socio-physical contexts.

5.4. Thinking processes and their relevance to writing instruction

The examination of the preceding proverbs, and those presented in the other chapters of this book, illustrate that much of the complexity surrounding proverbs is based not only on the reasoning skills that are involved in their processing but

sometimes also on the complex chains of socio-historical knowledge trailing the referents in culturally-specific proverbs. The information on brain development and current theories of metaphor processing, indicate that we cannot consider socio-cultural and physiological factors as mutually independent when we seek to ascertain how we learn, how we think, and how we learn to think. Proverbs' general use of metaphor and metonymic allusion present a quintessential bridge for the synthesizing of the cognitivist perspective and the social-constructionist perspective on reasoning and communication; proverbs force us to recognize the interface of cognition and language by showing us how we combine the reasoning tools we are born with (i.e., the ability to infer, compare, and generalize) and the recognition of the socio-linguistic cues that tell us when, how, and to what we should apply these skills. Since these cognitive skills are fundamental in practically any human endeavor, it is not a surprise to find that the honing of these skills is one of the principal aims of schooling. In addition, since much of our communication is linguistically based, it is also not surprising to find that the honing of these skills becomes the prime target of most writing and reading comprehension tasks.

What is often overlooked, however, is how socio-cultural interaction (even at the abstract level of reader and author) impacts these tasks. As explained thus far, there are cultural elements embedded in our language that appear transparent to us but that on closer examination we find to be rather complex and vague. It is in the critical examination of our uses of language and entrenched expressions that we can see how much we take for granted and how extravagant our assumptions are about what we can expect everybody to be able to understand. Furthermore, if such entrenched forms of expression, such as the apparently simple proverb, reveal a complexity not before suspected, then we can reasonably suspect that other forms of verbal art are equally complex and may merit their place in the writing classroom as tools for the honing of cognitive skills. Manzo (1981: 412), for example, has conceived a way to incorporate the teaching of proverbs in the language-arts classroom. According to him, students can collect proverbs and seek to understand them and explicate them to their classmates. If the classroom is ethnically diverse, and students can draw actual proverbs from their particular ethnic communities and then share these with their classmates, the educator can use the diverse body of proverbs gathered in this assignment to get students to compare and analyze them. This type of exercise not only promotes multicultural awareness by informing students about diverse customs and values, but also serves the task of promoting complex thinking skills. The more common higher order thinking skills involved in the processing of proverbs are (1) abstract reasoning, (2) reconfiguration of symbols, (3) metalinguistic awareness, and (4) metacognition. We can now turn to describing these skills and mentioning

how they are involved in proverb processing. This is done with the aim of not only furthering the general argument concerning the complexity of proverb as a form of expression but also with the aim of making an initial observation concerning the parallels between the thinking skills employed in this type of oral communication and the literacy skills targeted in the writing classroom.

5.4.1. Abstract reasoning

Proverbs function on the principle of generalization. A proverb instantiates the general and abstract in the concrete and particular. We hear "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" and we are to understand that the "message" of the proverb is neither commentary on our possession of a bird nor of the value of a bird, but that something already in one's possession is of more value than something of potentially more value but which is yet to be gained. When presented with a proverb, we are called on to make a generalization based on a particular instantiation; that is, we are to engage in *abstraction* by virtue of moving from the concrete to the general. This is one of the paradoxical features of proverbs: it is their concreteness that moves us toward abstraction. The phenomenon of *abstraction* is the result of the forces of contextualization. That is, when we are presented with an utterance that seems incompatible with the context in which it is uttered, we seek to reconcile the two. In this regard Honeck's (1997: 128–133) *extended conceptual base theory* (ECBT) for the processing of proverbs proves useful. The ECBT proposes that once we hear a proverb we formulate a literal understanding of it. The literal understanding almost invariably fails because the proverb's referents are usually not part "of the cognitive environment" (i.e., their immediate relevance to the context is not apparent).[4] This leads the hearers of the proverb to recognize a problem of relevance and to employ "a *communication appraisal factor* that involves setting a criterion for deciding whether

4 Sperber and Wilson (1986: 94) make an interesting observation relating to what constitutes the "cognitive environment" and its relation to context. They imply that there is a default sense of context that is apparent in "wants that usually don't have to be spelled out, like 'I don't want to kill anyone' and 'I want to go on living.'" Such foundational "wants," they argue, are only made explicit when someone makes a "counter-intuitive" argument such as "I want a drink, so I'll drink this poison." The statement is counter intuitive in so far as the default interpretive context of self-preservation is in place. However, in another context (e.g., a Halloween costume party where a drink is playfully labeled "poison") the utterance will not appear to be counter-intuitive because the cognitive environment enables it.

an utterance is worthy of further thought" (Honeck 1997: 129; emphasis in the original). If the hearers decide to reconcile the proverb with the context, they then follow the *ostension maximization principle*, which is the idea that a broader, more general, meaning needs to be considered for the utterance so that it can subsume more than its own literal instantiation. Once the point of generalization is reached, it is easier for the hearers to provide a figurative meaning for the utterance because they are already thinking abstractly – they have moved from the literal to the general by virtue of using inferences, associations, and elaboration in relation to the referents mentioned in the proverb. This then leads the hearer to recognize the figurative meaning (the general message) of the proverb, and to connect that meaning to the context. The latter action is described by Honeck as the "connection problem," and it is in regard to this aspect that the theory appears to founder because it proposes that proverbs

> force people to synthesize information at a high level in a totally abstract medium. This medium has been termed a *conceptual base*, and hence the name of the theory. It must be emphasized that the notion of a conceptual base is only a claim that the representational format for the figurative meaning of a proverb is nonimagistic and nonlinguistic. The ECBT makes no claim about the specific nature of the information encoded in a conceptual base. Because that information is writ in mentalese, and the stuff of mentalese has yet to be explicated to anyone's satisfaction, any claim about the contentive details of a conceptual base would be premature. (Honeck 1997: 131–132)

Thus, Honeck's theory steps back from telling us how we come to connect the abstract to the concrete, and leaves us with the vague idea that the representation of the figurative meaning of a proverb is neither imagistic nor linguistic – which leaves us wondering how else (aside from "logically") we distill or translate meaning for cryptic phrases like proverbs – and that the brain has its own language (mentalese) when it comes to relating the abstract with the concrete.

Nevertheless, we do know that we carry out the task of reconciling the abstract with the concrete, and we recognize it to the point of associating degrees of intelligence with it. The importance of recognizing patterns and being able to make solid generalizations from particular observations is one of the foundations of the scientific method and theoretical thinking in general. The benefits of promoting this kind of thinking across disciplines is clear, but they are particularly important in writing classes where students are continuously being asked to ascertain the general idea of a text by recognizing the interrelationship of the particular points that comprise it, and to personally produce a composition that instantiates mastery of said skill.

5.4.2. Reconfiguration of symbolic terms

Another important skill that is involved in the processing of proverbs and targeted in the writing classroom is the ability to recognize the symbolic nature of some of the referents and expressions often encountered in texts. The teaching of figures of speech, or tropes (e.g., simile, metaphor, metonymy, irony, hyperbole, personification), is often the target of instruction in a writing classroom, and such tropes involve the *reconfiguration* of symbolic terms to access a particular or desired meaning. The ability to recognize when an utterance or referent is not to be taken literally brings us back to the issues of relevance addressed by Honeck's (1997) ECBT. The notion of extending the possible domain of a referent in an utterance to reconcile it with an apparently incompatible context applies to symbolic representations as well. Where the *reconfiguration* of symbolic terms departs from *abstraction* is in its need for familiarity with conventional associations. Whereas in *abstraction* we consider the general mental activity of induction through inference and elaboration based on real-world knowledge and cause-and-effect relationships, in the *reconfiguration* of symbolic terms these skills must be supplemented by knowledge of the *conventional associations* attributed to particular symbols. Since particular symbols are culture-specific, it is not enough to be able to carry out the mental function of induction to get to a desired meaning; that mental effort has to be supplemented with familiarity of conventional associations. For example, if we are to understand that someone is to be recognized as brave when that person is described as a lion, we have to know that a lion is generally considered fierce and unrelenting. If we are unfamiliar with the conventional associations invested in particular referents, we are likely to miss the desired message.

The discussion of the symbolic representations embedded in proverbs is a good way to explore the foundations of the associations that invest symbols with meaning, and in a culturally-diverse classroom this makes for an informative discussion about cultural differences, values, and originality of thought – something which is often difficult to communicate to students who feel intimidated by writing and are less likely to feel capable of satisfying the request that often accompanies the teaching of tropes: "Use figurative language to make your writing fresh and unique." Once the use of language is talked about as a tool in itself instead of simply as a transparent vehicle for ideas, students of writing are moved to a complex plane of language awareness (i.e., metalinguistics), and proverbs can be used to illustrate some of the elements at work in this plane as well.

5.4.3. Metalinguistic awareness

Even a cursory examination of proverbs reveals that much of their uniqueness rests on their indirect nature. Proverbs are used to comment on something, or to get people to think or do something, but that something is not directly expressed in the proverb text. Proverbs, in fact, function as indirect speech acts according to Searle's (1975) definition of them because proverbs act as "an utterance in which one illocutionary act (a 'primary' act) is performed by way of the performance of another act (a 'literal' act)" (Schiffrin 1994: 59). For example, the utterance of the phrase "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" constitutes a speech act in as much as it consists of three components: a *locutionary act* (the production of sounds with meaning), an *illocutionary act* (a conventional communicative goal achieved in making the utterance), and a *perlocutionary act* (the end result or effect reached by making the utterance). When an utterance can perform a primary and a secondary illocutionary act simultaneously, the utterance can be considered an indirect speech act. The idea of indirectness rests on the notion that an utterance can have a primary and a secondary function simultaneously. So that an utterance such as "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" can serve two (and potentially more) aims: to assert a fact to someone, and to exhort someone to action.

The utterance "the squeaky wheel gets the grease," then, executes two illocutionary acts: it makes an assertion (the secondary "literal act") and it exhorts to action (the "primary act"). The important aspect to keep in mind here is that in order for this particular utterance to have the quality of an indirect speech act, it has to be intended and recognized as a proverb, which means that it has to be recognized as a figurative expression relating to the topic it is called on to address. If the utterance is not recognized as a proverb, then it will only be understood as an assertion and it will thus only constitute one illocutionary act.

When the utterance is recognized as a proverb, then, the aim of the utterance shifts from being an assertion to being an exhortation, and this becomes the primary illocutionary act (the primary aim of the utterance). The primary illocutionary act (the exhortation) does not preclude the secondary illocutionary act (the assertion of a fact), but it does give rise to the question of how the primary aim is recognized given that the semantic nature of the utterance evidently supports only the assertive ("literal") function. This is inherently a question of how we discern the intended meaning of an utterance. Searle (1975: 60–61) says that "meaning consists in part in the intention to produce understanding in the hearer. . . . [And in] indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer."

Like Honeck's ECBT theory, however, Searle's theory of indirect speech acts does not provide a definite set of rules that guide the proper combination or role of these informing factors, but he does describe plausible patterns of reasoning which involve factors of linguistic convention, background knowledge, and social conditions that lead to particular communicative understandings. The usefulness of Searle's notion of indirect speech acts in relation to proverbs is that it targets communicative aims. By considering that the utterance of a proverb may not only be meant as an assertion of fact but also as an exhortation to action, we are led to ask why certain rhetorical actions are chosen over others. For example, we can rightly ask why someone would choose an utterance that communicates something indirectly instead of one that does it directly if the aim is to get someone to do, or think, or feel something. The answer appears to be that although that is the primary aim, it is also not the only one.

In fact, there are two equally important aims in everyday communicative exchanges: 1) the speaker wants the hearer to know or do something, and 2) the speaker wants to make the hearer perceive the intention behind that first aim in a particular way. Thus we get to the question of motivation behind the surface form of linguistic expressions. In regard to indirect forms often used as directives (such as "Can you do this?" and "Would you do this?" instead of "Do this."), Searle (1975: 74) considers that "the chief motivation – though not the only motivation – for using... [them] is politeness." The idea is that by veiling the imperative force of the directives, the speaker can get the hearer to form an alternative perception of the nature of her/his compliance by making it seem optional instead of compulsory, and this, in turn, implies respect for the hearer's volition. This constitutes a means of politeness. Given that proverbs can be said to be directives because they request of the hearer to think a certain way about a certain topic, and that the imperative force of the directive is veiled, the principle of politeness appears to be at work in proverb use as well (see Obeng 1996; Domínguez Barajas 2005: 92).

This does not mean, however, that proverbs only function as directives or as any one particular type of speech act (representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, declaratives) but that as indirect speech acts they carry out a primary illocutionary act (e.g., advice, request, thank, challenge) in addition to the secondary one (e.g., assert), and this speaks to the complexity and diversity of language use across social groups even if linguistic surface forms are shared.

Although the terminology of speech act theory may be complex, the ideas are something with which we are patently familiar because we are aware through our use of everyday language that sometimes what is said is not what is meant, or that something is meant in addition to what is said. In fewer words, we are aware of the ambiguity of intention with which language is often burdened, and

this *metalinguistic awareness* is revealed in our use of language to talk about the functions and follies of language use. Familiarity with sarcasm, double entendre, puns, teasing, and allusion is common because these linguistic phenomena are a basic staple of our communicative diet and constitute a level of linguistic creativity. However, when we are removed from a familiar communicative environment in which we can easily identify these phenomena based on discursive convention, the ability to gauge what is meant as ironic, sarcastic, or in any other non-literal way is usually not as reliable. Thus familiarity with communicative conventions and ways of signaling social and communicative intention are just as important as extensive vocabulary and knowledge of grammar to carry out successful communication in any discursive community.

The degree of familiarity with communicative convention is particularly important to keep in mind in the writing classroom because many students of writing who are unfamiliar with the language and/or conventions often employed by published writers – particularly those who write for academia – find themselves unable to successfully negotiate many of the literacy tasks they are called on to perform. The importance of metalinguistic factors in the encoding and decoding of intention requires that students be taught to see these factors as the means by which to recognize and gauge nuanced uses of language. It is crucial for students of writing to be familiar with elemental representations of language in written form in order for them to grapple with discussions involving the textual representation of conversational prosody, rhetorical strategies in discourse, and the repercussions these have on the structural elements and persuasive nature of a text.

The exploration of genres with which students are rather familiar (e.g., proverbs, riddles, songs, legends, anecdotes) might be said to provide fertile ground on which to cultivate students' interest in, and awareness of, the multifaceted elements of language use, and to get them to consider that language is not a transparent vehicle that brings forth their thought in pristine form, but that very often we are unaware of how and to what degree language transforms and adds elements to the ideas we express – especially if we remain ignorant of alternative forms of expression. The use of an oral tradition, such as proverbs, to get students of writing to initiate their awareness of the inherent inaccuracy of the language/thought relationship can be approached by having the students examine how they reached their understanding of a given proverb, or by having them examine the different meanings that were uncovered in the process of interpreting a proverb. In the course of examining why they understood a – preferably unfamiliar – proverb as they did, students are very likely to examine the linguistic cues that led them to make particular assumptions and associations, and this will help them see how variable or invariable the paths of reasoning they followed are and what impact, if any, their backgrounds have on their ways of thinking.

5.4.4. Metacognition

With many of the exercises that can be devised involving the use of proverbs, or other verbal art, students are likely to engage in some form of *metacognition* – the act of thinking about how we think. For example, because proverbs are an indirect form of commentary about a topic, an examination of proverbs requires the explication of the tacit elements that bring about a given proverb's communicative effect. This exercise in proverb interpretation and analysis involves metacognitive as well as metalinguistic awareness because students must examine the way(s) they came to understand a linguistic construct – they, in fact, have to think about how they think, and how language guides that thinking. The skills developed by this type of exercise can then be applied to writing tasks. Hypothetically, if *explicit* connections between writing tasks and cognitive exercises like the one described above are made by the writing instructor, many writing students might reach a better understanding of what is expected in certain modes of writing (such as the "author evacuated" prose of "essayist literacy"; viz. Farr 1993).

Being aware of the reasoning patterns we follow, and how our language influences those patterns, writers are more likely to recognize flaws in logic and rhetorical strategies, as well as the construction of sound arguments. The higher-order thinking skills employed in the processing of proverbs are also crucial for an understanding of some common topics in writing-centered instruction, such as textual coherence and development (which require the ability to extrapolate and elaborate ideas in relation to a given topic, which is to say that inductive and deductive reasoning must be carried out); issues of voice and style (which requires awareness of language to ascertain the results of particular rhetorical choices); and issues of point of view and reader response (which involve awareness of alternative reasoning strategies). The parallels between the skills involved in proverb processing and those targeted in the writing classroom show us that language invariably combines socio-cultural particulars (the social-constructionist premise) with universal reasoning abilities (the cognitivist premise), and this moves us closer to dismantling the idea that higher-order thinking skills are exclusively linked to particular communities, particular social contexts, or even particular modes of communication.

Chapter 6
The academic stakes of language use

When a discursive practice, such as the use of proverbs, thrives instead of buckling under the pressures of language change and cultural assimilation, we must consider that it persists because it serves a purpose. Its use is a good indicator of its function, and its function leads us to its purpose. In the case of the López social network, I have described the types of settings and conditions which prompted the use of proverbs, and I have deduced from those uses that this particular discursive practice served several social, as well as communicative, purposes. But given the reality of the social network, the story doesn't end there, for a question that emerges from this study and the various facets that constitute it (e.g., the data, its analysis, and the claims concerning social functions) is why such social functions are even necessary.

The members of the López social network use proverbs to support argumentative claims, to give advice, to establish rapport, and to entertain. These functions serve to promote intra-group solidarity through the (re)affirmation of cultural and interpersonal bonds not only on the basis of the content of the message but also on the basis of the form the message takes. The network members need to do so because their status in their host community as well as in its community of origin is always in question.

In their host community, their status as ethnolinguistic minorities impresses upon them their social exclusion, an exclusion that is primarily – but not entirely – premised on a key feature of their identity: their language. The members of the López social network are well aware that that their language use is tied to their social identity, and they have correspondingly chosen to cultivate the communicative means by which they can replenish and revalorize their identity as Mexicans – an ever-present task, given the sometimes waning but mostly waxing hegemonic drive to homogenize the general population.

In their community of origin, the members of the social network find that their prolonged absences or intermittent visits leave them open to continuous evaluation of their membership status. They are thus equally put to the test when they return home as when they're away from it, and like in their host community, the most common test to which they are subjected in their community of origin is, ironically enough, the gauging of their linguistic and discursive compliance to that of the mainstream.

But whereas the pressure to exhibit allegiance to the community of origin often comes for the López social network from relatives and friends, in the host community, the pressure generally comes from what Pratt (1991) has termed the "contact zones." Described by Pratt as the "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths" (34), the contact zones for the ethnic and non-ethnic sectors of U.S. society are commonly public institutions such as schools, social service agencies, law enforcement dependencies, and healthcare centers among others.

By their very nature, some social contexts, such as law enforcement, make the power asymmetry between social groups readily apparent; whereas other social contexts, such as schooling, tend to veil such asymmetry. Moreover, when the power asymmetry is perceived in usually volatile contexts, such as law enforcement, it is usually attributed to the conditions commonly defining the context. For example, in the context of law enforcement, the social tension that is manifested is commonly characterized as "police officers imposing the rule of law on presumable offenders" rather than "police officers subduing someone who is viscerally reacting to perceived injustice." In order to see that particular instances of conflict in such contexts are manifestations of broader socially-rooted problems requires a particular socio-ethnic awareness that consider how the tension is linked to power differentials rooted in social group memberships. To put this more concretely, we may evaluate the arrest of a person of color as merely an instance of someone being charged with breaking the law, but that particular event takes on greater social significance when we consider that people of color are more likely to be arrested than their white counterparts (Blank 2001: 35), that they are disproportionately represented in our prisons,[1] and that the media generally depicts them as criminals and thus perpetuates stereotypes and social biases (Portales 2002; Santa Ana 2002; Rome 2004).

In contrast to law enforcement, the educational context is not seen in the collective imagination as one defined by social tensions but by benign aims. To speak of the educational domain as a contact zone requires a socially-informed awareness that recognizes that non-mainstream students experience a tension in it that their mainstream counterparts do not. The tension is founded primarily on the ethnolinguistic and discursive issues that have formed the subtext of this book: conformity, solidarity, and exclusion. If it is in great part through discursive practice that group membership is continuously evaluated, then those who

1 The U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that as of mid 2005 "an estimated 12% of black males, 3.7% of Hispanic males, and 1.7% of white males in their late twenties were in prison or jail" (2006: 1).

define themselves on the basis of their ethnolinguistic difference will continue to see themselves – and be seen and treated by others – as outsiders, unless that difference is legitimized in their society.

If the educational context is considered a contact zone, we are forced to confront the responsibility of attending to diverse student populations without thinking that the only mandate is to promote sociolinguistic, if not cultural, assimilation. In fact, that latter approach is perhaps the quickest way to promote resistance, alienation, or self-loathing among ethnolinguistic minorities. Michelle Hall Kells (2002) observes as much in her consideration of the writing composition classroom as a contact zone. She gives us an instance of such a classroom by polling the language attitudes of composition students at a southern Texas university, where she finds that both Mexican-origin and "Anglo" students not only subscribe to nefarious language myths (e.g., English is more logical than other languages; English is purer than Tex-Mex; Tex-Mex is a corruption of Spanish; pronunciation is indicative of intelligence) but that teachers' perception of their pedagogical goal, their way of reaching it, and their inattention to student ethnolinguistic background make the composition classroom "a site that implicitly and explicitly reinforces language and literacy myths" (36). Kells considers that the prejudice manifested in such views is likely to be a contributing factor to "Mexican American students' high failure and withdrawal rate (45% to 50%) within 1st-year composition courses at this southern Texas university" (33); but that consideration must be more expansive, for the consequences of such egregious scholastic desertion do not stop at the door of the institution the students abandon, but instead extend to the society as whole in so far as the exodus (of which more will be said further in this chapter) is a direct blow to the realization of human potential on which the national – if not universal – commonweal is based.

Conversely, the effects of linguistic discrimination need not only be considered in terms of gross numbers, for our humanity compels us to consider individual experience and worth to a comparable degree. The late prominent Chicana writer and activist, Gloria Anzaldúa poignantly encapsulates the impact of linguistic intolerance in the contact zones, though she doesn't use that particular term: "...[I]f you really want to hurt me," she writes, "talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (1987: 59). Unfortunately, the importance of ethnic identity is often ignored by those of the mainstream, who instead see its loss as a natural result of, or prerequisite to, full-fledged social integration. The loss of ethnic pride, rather than a personal choice or progressive evolution, is most likely the aftermath of countless skirmishes in the contact zone. The skirmishes are sometimes subtle,

as when ethnic minority students realize that the literary canon has yet to change significantly if it is ever to make them feel that they are part of the spirit of the nation; and sometimes the skirmishes are brutal, as when generation after generation of Mexican-Americans literally have their heritage language beaten or coerced out of them in the public school classrooms of the American Southwest (MacGregor-Mendoza 2000). But in the end, the onslaught leads many members of ethnolinguistic minorities to submit, to conform, if only to find a measure of peace that enables day-to-day functioning in their society.

The skirmishes in the contact zones have led some authorities to acknowledge that language use plays an important role in enhancing lived experience. But awareness and action are not necessarily concomitant. The National Council of Teachers of English, for instance, resolved during its 1974 annual business meeting that it affirmed "the students' right to their own language – to the dialect that expresses their family and community identity, the idiolect that expresses their unique personal identity" (NCTE 1998); yet this has not led to the resounding reformation of language attitudes that it was perhaps expected to have, even though composition scholars such as Elbow (2002) appear to say that it has. But if it had, other composition scholars such as Kermit Campbell (2005), Carmen Kynard (2007), and Artze-Vega et al. (2007), would not be calling for what to some people might seem like a radical challenge to standard language policies in the writing classroom, such as the use of the vernacular in conjunction with the standard dialect in academic writing, or the extending of bilingual education to the college composition level in order to ensure that Latino students maintain their heritage language and further their bilingual skills. Such propositions may seem drastic, or at least impractical, to those whose charge it is to perpetuate the standard – teachers of English, and writing instructors in particular – but in light of the apparent experiences ethnolinguistic minorities have in mainstream classrooms, and the dire statistics persistently linked to the academic performance of ethnic minorities, perhaps these propositions shouldn't be cavalierly dismissed.

The importance of language in self-perception and social integration has to be recognized as being on par with cognitive development. Language is a defining human feature, but not simply because it is something we are born into or with the capacity for, but because it is the primary means to social empowerment, self-awareness, and self-expression. Linguists, rhetoricians, and philologists in general have always recognized that the power of language is rooted not so much in its innateness, its systemic form, or its potential for mutability, but in its practical function as a tool for social management – a means to fashion and direct human destinies in so far as it delimits perceptions and conceptions of reality and possibility. This has been one of the great insights of those who have devoted their life to the study of language from antiquity to the present.

Marcus Tullius Cicero, the great roman orator, fully aware of the power of language in the first century B.C.E., warns, for instance, that

> Eloquence is one of the supreme virtues... [and] this faculty, which, after compassing a knowledge of facts, gives verbal expression to the thoughts and the purposes of the mind in such a manner as to have the power of driving the hearers forward in any direction in which it has applied its weight; and the stronger this faculty is, the more necessary it is for it to be combined with integrity and supreme wisdom, and if we bestow fluency of speech on persons devoid of those virtues, we shall not have made orators of them but shall have put weapons in the hands of madmen. (Cicero 1948, 2: 43, 45)

And in our time, prominent French linguist, Émile Benveniste observes that language is hardly a tool that humans have fashioned, for our very sense of ourselves depends on its use, and so he considers it a self-defining human ability when he writes,

> It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone constitutes the concept of "ego" in reality, in its reality which is that of the being. (Benveniste 1971: 224)

So that both great figures in their respective fields alert us to the power of language to determine our lives by serving as the primary means by which we position ourselves in our society as a result of externalizing, evaluating, and even constructing our thoughts.

It has been with the idea that language, mind, and action are linked that the previous chapters have presented the parallels between the cognitive faculties employed in the processing of proverbs and the cognitive skills targeted in the teaching of writing. The tracing of these parallels leads to two immediate conclusions: (1) the notion that literate subjects necessarily possess a mental acumen superior to that of their non-literate counterparts is undermined, and (2) the skills favored in the academy and those required in the processing of situated (i.e., context-bound) oral discourse illuminates the tripartite complex of language, culture, and cognition. But, as stated in the first chapter of this book, although the immediate gains from these insights seem to pertain exclusively to pedagogical or academic matters, the truth is that the issues go beyond schooling. Language use issues, whether approached from a practical or theoretical standpoint, merit our attention because language is the primary means by which we construct meaning, and, as such, it can be thought of as the oil that keeps the parts of the social machinery from grinding down and even prevents the social apparatus from coming to a halt.

The conception of discourse as socioculturally-situated language use allows us to move beyond the facile notion that sharing a language by itself is the way to

ensure or promote unity and progress in society. English-only movements in the United States and anti-immigrant sentiment are buoyed by such an assumption, an assumption that is premised on fear of change and the belief that language and societies are rigid and immutable rather than organic and evolutionary. The focus on language use (i.e., the praxis) reveals to us how mistaken we can be in assuming that the key to collaboration, unity, and progress lies exclusively in the preservation of language in the abstract (i.e., the system).

Contrary to the latter view, which serves as the philosophical foundation for the perpetuation of assimilationist language attitudes in the writing classroom and beyond, the ethnolinguistic information offered here underscores the benefits of sociolinguistically-informed pedagogical approaches in the teaching of writing. What we have learned from research in composition – particularly that based on ethnographic studies – is that in a multicultural country such as the U.S., it is imperative for effective educators to be aware of the variety of discursive and cognitive skills that ethnolinguistic minorities possess as a consequence of the social and communicative traditions they embrace at home. Alluding to such oral traditions and valuing them as legitimate and rich communicative strategies is the start of a productive awareness on the part of the teacher, and it can translate into educational environments and tasks that promote sociolinguistic and sociocognitive skills. But productive awareness of this sort is premised on an attitudinal repositioning in regard to diverse linguistic and cultural practices in the classroom; more concretely, this attitudinal shift involves seeing ethnolinguistic minority students as an asset rather than as a burden in the classroom.

Heath et al. (1991) have documented some ways in which this is being done already. These scholars have shown how sociolinguistic research and classroom practice can be synthesized to better serve those students "who are different culturally and linguistically" and whom educators tend to consider – as Sarah Freedman in the preface to that work writes – primarily as students "at risk" instead of considering them "children of promise" (7). In particular, Heath et al. provide a model of cross-age interactive tutoring that moves beyond the conventional idea of pairing gifted students with struggling ones; they suggest that students needing reading improvement serve as tutors to younger students. The approach puts the struggling students on the path to "seeing themselves as becoming 'experts' [on the] processes of reading, writing, and talking about what can be learned from personal experience, books, and oral retellings of others" (21). Such a move places the struggling "at-risk" student in a position of authority and responsibility that leads to greater awareness of the literacy and linguistic skills required in school and beyond. In fact, Heath et al. provide a short, but important, list of "literate behaviors" that are socio-culturally-based but which are often assumed as universal in U.S. classrooms and in popular

conceptions and evaluations of literate subjects: interpreting and paraphrasing texts, interrelating texts to other texts and to personal experience, using textual support in argumentation, making predictions based on textual information, as well as imagining similar situations and outcomes based on those described in texts, and finally talking about (i.e., assessing the significance) all of these activities (41). The articulation of such behaviors and expectations is essential if we are to have consensus on what being and becoming literate involves.

Following the path of Heath et al. (1991) in relating ethnolinguistic research to improved teaching methods, the data concerning the Mexican origin population presented in this book tells us that culture and language are just as important in an educational setting as are discrete drills intended to promote particular modes of thinking. That many students come to schools with modes of expression that have served their progenitors for generations and reflect mental sophistication tells us that incorporating non-mainstream discursive styles and strategies in the classroom and adopting an attitude of sensitivity towards cultural diversity will very likely create an ambiance of hospitality that nurtures in the student a positive attitude toward schooling.

Despite this book's focus on a Mexican social network, the argument made does not apply exclusively to students of Mexican origin, for it seems plausible that at least some of the same issues encountered here in relation to this population may be applicable to other ethnic and linguistics groups – but most assuredly to other Latino groups. It is crucial for the Latino population in the U.S. that educational approaches be reconsidered so that these might at least ameliorate, if not outright reverse, the trends in scholastic desertion and academic underachievement that continue to hamper the progress of most of the Latino populations of the U.S.

In chapter one it was suggested that the sheer growth of the Mexican-origin population in a city like Chicago should be seen as a call for research on the socio-linguistic characteristics of this group, its needs, and its impact on the surrounding community. In terms of education, the demand for this type of information is pressing because the educational track record of Latinos in general continues to be alarmingly poor not only at this particular metropolitan level but at the national level as well.

The most recent figures presented by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) on scholastic desertion in public high schools during the last three decades (1972 to 2004) show that Latinos (ages 16 to 24) continue to have the nation's highest status-dropout rate.[2] In fact, although Latinos accounted

2 A "status dropout" is someone who is not enrolled in high school and lacks a high school credential, as opposed to a "event dropout" who is a student in grades 9–12

for only 16.9% of the total student population counted by NCES in the 2002–2003 school year, they constituted 40.5% of the entire status-dropout population (Laird et al. 2006: 25). Given the impressive increase of the Latino populations across the country, it is imperative in terms of human potential and general social well-being that the Latino population's trend in school drop-out rates be curved.

One way to begin to retain ethnic minorities in school is by making the pursuit of an education less alienating for them. This aim may be served by attending to the following propositions concerning pedagogical issues that currently act as hindrances in classrooms in general, but particularly in those focusing on the teaching of standard English in written and spoken form.

6.1. Call for attitudinal change in the classroom

There are certainly other factors aside from socio-cultural alienation involved in scholastic desertion. One of the primary issues may well be poverty, as poverty-stricken families are often forced to have the younger members join the workforce in order to help sustain the family unit. This "choice," however, is not made in a socio-economic vacuum; it is made in a society where income potential is closely tied to levels of education. In this context, it becomes clear that the phenomenon of poverty-driven scholastic desertion is a self-perpetuating cycle, as the undereducated are forced into low-income producing jobs that eventually lead ensuing generations of family members to make the same "choices" as the previous generations.

Nevertheless, this phenomenon may not be the only one behind the academic dropout rate of Latinos. As we are told by one of the most prominent Latino figures in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, Victor Villanueva, in his testimonial of his own dropping out of school and eventual return to academia to earn his Ph.D., Latino students who drop out not only do so because they do not have the economic means to stay in school, but also because there are social influences at work against their pursuit of an education. One of the most powerful of these social influences is the negative attitude faced by linguistic minority speakers (either in terms of English dialect or language other than English spoken) in school. It is an attitude that is rooted in the ideas that some dialects are deficient and that facility of expression is indicative of conceptual mastery; both of which lead to the perfidious conclusion, as Villanueva phrases

who "left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent" (Laird et al. 2006: 1). The two categories help identify long-term and short-term trends respectively.

it, that "bad language equals insufficient cognitive development" (1993: 11). The perpetuation of this attitude toward difference is at the heart of much of the academic alienation experienced by those whose difference rests no only in their phenotype but also in their ethnolinguistic identity.

Other social influences that contribute to academic alienation within many social groups, but particularly among Latinos, are peer and family pressures that devalue schooling; internalized gender and racial stereotyping that contributes to personal insecurity and defeatism; inexperience and lack of familiarity with school protocols, mentoring, and financial assistance; and curriculum-induced alienation (Yowell 1999). Because of the factors involved in academic alienation, it seems understandable that many ethnolinguistic minority students who have suffered them welcome the first opportunity they have to leave the classroom.

In order to ensure that those ethnic and linguistic minority students who continue their education will find a more hospitable educational experience, alternative pedagogical approaches have to be considered and implemented. The principal change required, however, is an attitudinal one, as one of the major fears among many teachers, administrators, and parents alike is that changes in teaching approaches and the relinquishing of "traditional" materials will "water down" the curriculum and undermine academic standards for the sake of appeasing the "special interests" (i.e., promoters of multiculturalism) within the community (Smagorinsky 1996: 23). As long as this negative attitude toward curriculum changes that promote multicultural diversity remains in place, no diversity-oriented changes in pedagogical practice will take root and thrive.

Educators and school administrators have to be the first to recognize that support for diversity of thought, ethnicity, and language use does not necessarily entail the undermining of standards but quite the contrary. The Standards for the English Language Arts set forth by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) emphasize the importance of diversity of materials and respect for students' abilities and backgrounds as students forge their language-skills repertoires. Among the standards, there is an explicit call for student "understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles," and an implicit call for bilingual education by indicating that "students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum."[3]

3 For the list of standards see Smagorinsky (1996: viii–ix) or visit the NCTE website: http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm.

These standards certainly speak to the use and examination of diverse oral traditions in the writing classroom. The examination of the properties that give meaning to oral traditions, such as the use of proverbs, touches at once on many of the standards proposed by the NCTE/IRA. What is more, the use of material that resonates with the ethnolinguistic background of non-mainstream students is more likely to make the classroom experience more hospitable for them and intellectually broadening for mainstream students.

6.2. Call for methodological change in the classroom

One of the main issues in discussions involving student diversity is that of learning styles. It is surely true that there are several learning approaches (e.g., visual, analogical, exploratory, auto-didactic, quantifiable, dialogic) and degrees of personal affinity to each. This means that the broadening of the teaching approaches will promote engagement with subject matter, learning, and retention. In the writing classroom, this concern involves not only an emphasis on the process and product involved in writing tasks, but also on the externalization of the cognitive processes involved in writing tasks. This is to say that the modeling of patterns of reasoning involved in making arguments has to be supplemented with explicit articulation of how those patterns of reasoning are reached. Based on his teaching experiences, Smagorinsky (1996: 22–38) exemplifies how a literature teacher can move from modeling an analytical approach to a text, to externalizing the thought processes students need to follow in order to produce similar analytical processes. Instead of simply asking students to answer questions that address the abstract issues enmeshed in a narrative, Smagorinsky shows his students how to ask questions that target the different levels of analysis involved in critical reading. By virtue of getting students to understand that there are different levels of analysis in relation to a text, Smagorinsky moves from simply asking questions that gauge which students already excel in certain analytical skills, to showing students which questions they need to ask in order to engage in the abstract reasoning the teacher models for them. The teacher thus pulls the curtain aside, so to speak, and shows students what is behind the questions normally asked of them about the reading material they discuss. The teacher tells them that there are "textually explicit questions" (which involve recall and observation of explicitly stated information), "textually implicit questions" (which involve the explication of simple and complex implied relationships), and "scriptally implicit questions" (which involve generalizations based on the implicit overarching message[s] and structure of a text). By telling students about *the nature of the questions* they are asked and getting them to

produce similar questions, the teacher moves from *implicit* instruction (i.e., the modeling approach) to the *explicit* instruction of analytical procedures.

Given that the analytical skills targeted in critical reading are also essential for sound writing (because students are expected to transfer those skills to their own writing in order to produce reasonable and persuasive arguments), the reasoning processes involved in producing sound arguments have to be clear to the students, and explicit instruction and guidelines are crucial for students who are simply unfamiliar with the way these reasoning processes are being approached.

In considering that proverbs and other forms of verbal art can be used in the writing classroom to engage students in analytical thinking, this type of explicit instruction is paramount when an analysis of the underlying logical connections that give a proverb meaning are examined. This is to say that it is not enough to tell students what the meaning of a proverb is; the aim should be to get them to engage in the analytical process of explication of a metaphorical/figurative text, analysis of the social context influencing meaning, and also to get them to identify the rationale they followed to reach an understanding. By doing the latter, the students are more likely to become conscious of the reasoning skills that they use intuitively, and they are therefore more likely to think of those skills as tools that can be applied creatively across contexts and tasks. This approach stands in direct opposition to the passive learning that often goes on in relation to unilateral information transfer (when the teacher is the only purveyor and ratifier of the "answers") and drill-based instruction (which promotes memorization but not flexibility of thought). The awareness and reflection involved in the examination of reasoning processes and personal ways of thinking involves active learning because students take the initiative in the production and analysis of information instead of relying on the teacher to provide it. Awareness of, and reflection on, the ways they reason, while comparing their reasoning strategies to those of their classmates, afford students the opportunity to evaluate the positive aspects of linguistic and cultural diversity encountered in the classroom.

6.3. Call for substantive change in the classroom

When speaking of a positive perception of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations, it is not enough for educators to speak of the benefits of multiculturalism and the value of diversity – these benefits must be made evident to students if the latter are to appreciate them. The first step in showing that diversity is valued and beneficial is clearly its inclusion in the form of the materials presented for study in the classroom. It is clear to students that

multiculturalism is simply a word if the material presented for study is heavily ethnocentric, but equally problematic is the selection of the works that are to transform an ethnocentric canon into a multicultural one. In the process of transforming a canon, critics argue, there is an implicit censorship in the act of replacing one work with another simply on the grounds of favoring one interest (i.e., multiculturalism) over another. Smagorinsky (1992) speaks to this problem by making a distinction between censorship and selection. He sets this distinction in the context of the 1974 Kanawha County curriculum dispute "over the types of texts students should read in school." The 1974 protesters of curriculum reform in Kanawha County wanted to maintain the existing curriculum in place and not have it revamped with the inclusion of texts that reflected "multicultural perspectives" (212). In considering that those who protested against the change did so because they "sought to preserve and perpetuate their values and way of life by controlling and censoring the books their children read," Smagorinsky responds to James Moffet's argument that if the "transmitting [of] any heritage entails selecting some ideas, frameworks and values and excluding others," and "exclusion is built into the very idea of education as cultural transmission[,] what's the difference between prohibiting certain facts and ideas and simply omitting them? In other words, how far does the selectivity of ["progressive" and pluralistic] education have to go before it becomes censorship?" (213). Censorship, Smagorinsky replies, is essentially different from selection in that the first is generally reactive and seeks to exclude material – and all the voices, perspectives, and experiences tied to it – whereas, selection is proactive and seeks to include materials that are deemed to have potential value (213). That is, the aim behind the selection process constitutes the difference between including texts and excluding texts. In the former, the aim is to take social change into account by presenting varied and perhaps previously silenced perspectives; whereas the aim of the latter seeks to maintain the status quo regardless of the patent social and demographic changes at large.

Similarly, the debate of inclusion and exclusion of ethnolinguistic minority interests in the classroom goes beyond the initial issue of physical presence to that of cultural acknowledgment and representation. Ethnic and ethnolinguistic minority students are not included in the classrooms simply by being physically there; in fact, they are often done a disservice by having them believe that in order to be fully included (i.e., successfully educated) they have to divest themselves of the characteristics that set them apart. The staunch fanaticism for cultural assimilation is most clearly seen in the most recent English-only movements (despite being preceded by many similar monolingualist measures with similarly veiled aims [Judd 2000, 2003]) and anti-immigrant sentiment. In regard to students of Mexican descent, Martínez (2000) says that

> in many classrooms across the country, monolingual Spanish-speaking Chicana/o students are forced to surrender their native language and home culture in exchange for mainstream cultural norms and the standard English language. Although attempts have been made to provide monolingual Chicana/o students with the benefits of language and cultural components in instruction, the low Chicana/o participation in bilingual education programs and the lack of qualified bilingual teachers who can act as role models and mentors for Chicana/o students further exacerbates the schooling experience of Chicana/o students (Valencia and Aburto 1991). Even in schools that offer bilingual programs, policies and practices encourage the rapid transition of Chicana/o students into English-only classrooms. According to Macedo (1997), such attacks on the linguistic and cultural differences of Chicana/o students "not only negates the multilingual and multicultural nature of U.S. society, but blindly ignores the empirical evidence that has been amply documented in support of bilingual [and multicultural] education" (269). (Martinez 2000: 196)

Aside from the principal issue of linguistic inclusion, however, there remains that of cultural representation in the classroom, for even the inclusion of some texts as a response to the call for the implementation of multiculturalism may be as detrimental – if not more so – than excluding them if the selection of texts presents a skewed representation of ethnic minorities that reifies negative stereotypes. In this regard, Smagorinsky (1992: 223–225) addresses the issue by presenting for consideration the in-roads African-American literature has made in contemporary literature classrooms by way of the works of Richard Wright, Maya Angelou, Lorraine Hansberry, and Zora Neale Hurston. He points out that although the works by these writers are "exceptional works of literature and essential reading for concerned citizens," all of them portray "pre-Civil Rights movement experiences. [. . .] in settings notorious for their oppressive treatment toward blacks," and the selection of a few texts that are bound by such characteristics, Smagorinsky concludes, may

> offer a very narrow, negative and potentially destructive view of the experiences of black Americans. In the 1990s we unquestionably have far too many black citizens whose lives are adversely affected by discrimination. But we also have a strong, growing black middle class and prominent, successful black leaders such as Colin Powell and Douglas Wilder. Should American schoolchildren be exposed to a view of black Americans that focuses on vitriolic, dead-end encounters with whites? Are black and white people encouraged to develop a sense of kinship with one another through exclusive exposure to such texts? (Smagorinsky 1992: 224)

Perhaps the key issue Smagorinsky presents for consideration is that of exclusion once again. The problem seems to lie in exclusion when there exists the potential and wherewithal for inclusion. If the texts that speak to the experiences of

particular ethnic minorities are limited, then the question of representational balance is that much diminished, but to not pursue such a balance when there are numerous works offering a variety of perspectives on an ethnic minority's lived experience – as is the case for contemporary African-American and Latino/a literature – then the pedagogical effort may at best be only pedestrian and short-sighted, but at worst it can be a patently negligent disservice to students and an undermining of the aims of multicultural educational objectives.

What is at stake in not including in the classroom cultural and linguistic material that speaks to the reality and experience of ethnolinguistic minority students is their engagement in their academic role. If the selection of the substantive material of the classroom continuously conveys a dismissal of their socio-cultural presence, not only are those in charge of the selection process losing the opportunity to gratify these students' sensibilities but, far worse, they are taking the risk of promoting disenfranchisement and disenchantment among these students in and outside of school. If ethnolinguistic minority students learn and continue to feel alienated in the classroom, they are less likely to understand the basic premises on which their success in school and in society at large is predicated. Yowell's (1999) study of some of the factors involved in Latinos dropping out of school reveals that many Latino students share what Mickelson (1990) termed the "achievement-expectation paradox" among African-American students. According to Yowell (1999: 6), Mickelson found that African-American students were "more likely than White students to hold high expectations for their future educational success despite [their] low levels of academic performance." Similarly, in Yowell's study of 30 Latino students at a Midwestern urban high school, students' future educational expectations did not coincide with the educational foundations they were setting – or rather not setting – for themselves, and the reason for this lack of convergence appears to stem from a lack of academic procedural knowledge. Even though Yowell sets up her argument primarily in relation to the identity theory of "possible selves" (whereby people construct a potential/future role for themselves and then work toward it in light of the factors surrounding, informing, and enabling the construction of that role), a major point of her conclusion is that procedural knowledge is very important if students are to set the right foundations for academic success. Yowell explains:

> [P]rocedural knowledge serves to guide behavior and influence the interpretation of performance feedback. When procedural knowledge is limited or misinformed, it is possible that students' interpretation of performance and plans or strategies for goal attainment may be inappropriate. If a student, for example, does not understand that grade point average may have significance in determining eligibility for college attendance, then when she receives a "D," it is appropriate for her to take some measure of satisfaction in "passing," and continue to hold high educa-

> tional expectations. If a student taking vocational courses believes these courses are equivalent to college prep courses, then it is logically consistent for the student to expect to be prepared for college when she graduates. Similarly, if a student understands that hard work represents the route to educational achievement, then surely he ought to expect that, regardless of grade point average or courses taken, if he works hard he can become a doctor. Such misinformed interpretations of performance may be exacerbated in contexts where educational achievement is viewed as a function of obedience rather than as an outcome of learning. Thus, for these students, limited procedural knowledge may result in limited capacity to complete effectively the steps necessary to fulfill expectations for college matriculation, and may impair students' ability to accurately assess progress towards educational and career goals. (Yowell 1999: 20–21)

Hence, it is important for educators not only to be explicit about the significance of particular performance in relation to general educational goals, but, perhaps more importantly, to be aware themselves of the type of preparation that is being given to students by virtue of the material that is presented in the classroom.

As Martínez (2000) points out, the emphasis on "basic skills" instead of on critical thinking is more likely to leave ethnic minority students with nothing more than "the minimum competencies" required for survival instead of proficiency in complex thinking skills that can ensure academic and professional success. In fact, the issue of "transfer" (whereby students apply the skills they learn in school to their lives outside of it) is of particular saliency in discussions of critical thinking (Schroder 1999). When students are relegated to "basic skills" curricula, they are less likely to see how schooling is relevant to their lived experience and are thus more likely to fall victim to the perspectives of schooling Yowell characterizes as the exchange of obedience (in the form of homework completion, attendance, controlled behavior, and attainment of credits toward graduation) for an academic credential that ensures the desired future employment. When academic expectations and actual performance prove incompatible, however, students are frustrated and confused about the apparent failure of the implied promises of educational attainment. Furthermore, as long the continued academic failure of ethnic and linguistic minorities is seen as a result of students' socio-cultural background instead of as a by-product of institutional and cultural incompatibility, then no educational reform will suffice.

Correspondingly, the aim of this ethnolinguistic research has been to show that even the simplest forms of expression often involve very complex cognitive skills that are often the target of instruction, particularly in writing classrooms, and that, if this is taken into account, teaching with this awareness of the sociolinguistic background of students may make the learning experience more hospitable for non-mainstream groups. In the case of people of Mexican-origin, it

has been argued here, proverbs are an example of the complexity of thought, linguistic expression, and social interaction that contradicts notions of an endemic deficiency of higher-order cognitive skills across cultures and language use. But as long as such observations are ignored, the socio-educational model that will continue to thrive is the supplantationist one, wherein cultural and linguistic assimilation displaces the language and culture of origin because the latter is implicitly, if not explicitly, considered a hindrance toward social progress and self-actualization.

Schroder (1999) says something to this effect in relation to critical thinking. In responding to psychologist David Perkins, who in a discussion on transferability of thinking skills circulated an article by José Buscaglia positing a dichotomy between "an uncritical, irrational, and unscientific Latin American culture [. . . and] a critical, rational, and scientific American culture," Schroder indicates that "many American teachers. . . operate with the same conceptual framework. Attempts at 'multiculturalism' notwithstanding, many of our teachers still assume that children who are 'different' – be they immigrants, African-American, or poor – enter school with culturally[-]created handicaps in terms of their ability to learn" (12). The conception of "culturally handicapping" one's learning ability is synonymous with a view of "cultural deficiency," and as such, Schroder concludes that it is not that any socio-cultural group lacks the ability to think critically, or that they actually do not do so, but rather that what differs across cultures is "(a) the elaboration of a *concept* of critical thought [i.e., the abstraction of the cognitive practice];. . . (b) the cultural value placed on this activity; (c) the cultural tools or technologies available; and (d) the various domains or areas of life within which critical thought is encouraged or discouraged" (19; emphasis in the original). Thus, unless there is an attitudinal shift in the expectations of ethnic and linguistic minority students and an appreciation for the skills that are patent in their own ways of speaking and thinking, educators are unlikely to move beyond a biased perspective of the ever-growing ethnic and linguistic populations, and the latter's academic and professional failure rates will likely remain unchanged.

6.4. The importance of the socio-cognitive approach

It is indisputable that classrooms across the country, particularly those in urban areas, are increasingly multicultural and multilinguistic contact zones, and this means that cognitive skills, literacy, and discursive practices have to be considered in tandem to better serve diverse student populations. The significance of the features involved in the use of proverbs among a group of *mexicanos* leads

us to more than the documentation of a social network's discursive repertoire; it also leads us to extend this empirical evidence to a concrete application: reconsidering the dichotomy between language and literacy that has captured the popular imagination ever since literacy was linked with intelligence and orality with simple-mindedness (viz., Havelock 1982: 7–8; Bizzell and Herzberg 2001: 20). The use of proverbs by the López social network shows that this dichotomy is utterly false. Oral texts reveal that they involve the higher order thinking skills that written texts involve. In fact, these primarily oral texts fit in well with contemporary definitions of literacy that considers the teaching of reading and writing not only as the skills of encoding and decoding alphabetic symbols, but as the skills that require sophisticated reasoning, meta-awareness of language, mastery of conventional forms of expression, and the critical consideration of context and source in the evaluation of information.

This convergence of the oral and literate, the cognitive and the socio-cultural, the universal and the particular, is what has been uncovered here in terms of the study of the socio-cognitive elements in oral traditions. Far from being independent of each other, the social and the cognitive dimensions of language use are fused in everyday practice. To ignore that culture, language, and thought need to be approached simultaneously in regard to discursive analysis is to perpetuate a belief that language is autonomous of the people who use it and that universal standards can hold for all speakers. This belief becomes pernicious when linguistic behaviors are then taken to be indicative, or reflective, of cognitive processes. Such a chain of reasoning will continue to victimize those whose cultural and linguistic differences are patent, particularly in the institutions of social replication that our schools have come – but do not have to – be. From this vantage point (which considers how to apply what we know about the nature of language, culture, and thinking processes), we can see that one of the top priorities must be to inform educators about the ethnolinguistic minority students that continue to be the most underserved by our educational system. In regard to these students, we can say that they stand to benefit if there is a shift toward culturally receptive/sensitive teaching that also explicitly identifies for students the higher-order thinking skills that they are capable of and need to apply to the material encountered in the classroom and beyond.

Chapter 7
Beyond school halls

7.1. Matters of discourse

The previous chapter's focus on scholastic issues perhaps communicates a practicality to this project that, for all its pertinence to the concerns of writing teachers and other educators, must ultimately be seen as an ancillary of the project's broader concern – namely the consideration of socio-cognitive discourse analysis as an effective method for examining the interface between language and thought in social contexts. This broader concern calls for a final consideration of the analysis to which the data presented here have been subjected. In pointing out that the López social network accomplishes a limited number of social and communicative aims by making of use of proverbs, I have attempted to present a very systematic approach to the analysis of language and to the ascertainment of meaning; it is an approach that has at its base the cognitive theories of Bartlett, Honeck, and Lakoff and Johnson, coupled with the systematic approach to language that figures such as Jakobson, Saussure, and Benveniste have bequeathed to contemporary linguistics. Additionally, the fundamental anthropological influence that is reflected in my reliance on such prolific contemporary scholars as Hymes, Geertz, and Bauman attests to my drive to present a synthetic analytical approach that seeks to account for the fashioning of meaning in everyday practices. But, as I mentioned anecdotally in the introduction to this book, for every systemic consistency that is revealed in regard to the structure of language (a systematicity that promises relative clarity and certainty on the basis of its predictability), there is a dimension of referential ambiguity that emerges consistently as a result of the social particulars impacting our communicative exchanges.

This apparent incongruity fascinated the Russian philologist Mikhail Mikhalovich Bakhtin to such a degree that it became the foundation of his influential views on discourse, which although he himself never used the term, have come to be referred to as *dialogism* (Holquist 2002: 15). Writing what amounted to his philosophy of language in the 1930s, Bakhtin, like many other post-structuralists, recognized the importance of context in the formation of meaning and comprehension, and he accordingly made it a foundational element in regard to the idea of *dialogism*, which in turn resonates with what I have heretofore proposed about discourse analysis. *Dialogism*'s allure is primarily its flexibility –

that is, it is a theoretical premise that has the capacity not only to accept the mutability of context as a given but also to link language as an organic response to that mutability in the construction of meaning.

The nature of proverbs – their fixed form adapting to varied contexts in order to render potentially various meanings – and the rhetorical aims of the people who use them ultimately seem to beg for a consideration of the ambiguity that is part and parcel of language use. Can we write the circuit patterns of linguistic meaning and speaker intention? Can meaning be fixed? My inclination is to say no, but that would seem to undermine all the analysis that precedes this chapter. Bakhtin's *dialogism*, however, goes a long way toward resolving this apparent contradiction. "At the heart of everything Bakhtin ever did [. . .]," writes Michael Holquist in the introduction to Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, "is a highly distinctive concept of language. The conception has as its enabling *a priori* an almost Manichean sense of opposition and struggle at the heart of existence, a ceaseless battle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart, and centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere" (1981: xviii). The agonistic nature of language – as captured in the dynamic tension between form and function and the phenomenal result of that tension (i.e., meaning) was the focus of Bakhtin's work. Language for Bakhtin is not only the *means* for contention but the *site* of contention as well, for language, he observes, may be "stratified not only into dialects [. . .] according to formal linguistic markers" but it may also be stratified in accordance with socio-ideological features (Bakhtin 1981: xix). In this way, Bakhtin alludes initially to the treatment of language as a system (the province of structural linguistics), but he then also alludes to its social functions (the province of discourse analysis), and consequently he alludes to the relationship between these two aspects of linguistic phenomena. This perspective leads Bakhtin (1981: 428) to propose that there is continuous inclination to negotiate – and even suppress – the "heteroglossia of language," by which he means the varieties of expression that in themselves reveal multiple perpectives in regard to any phenomenon, and which are, in Holquist's words, "the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance," a condition that orients meaning in favor of the context rather than the text itself.

The "primacy of context over text," as Holquist phrases it, promises that "[a]t any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological – that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions" (Bakhtin 1981: 428). The influence of context on meaning, then, runs counter to that of text, if by "text" we expect fixity, integrity, or continuity of meaning. For this reason, *heteroglossia* is characterized as lan-

guage's "centrifugal force," the force that decentralizes – and thus foregrounds the relativity of – meaning so that new understandings can emerge.

Conversely, in his analytical consideration of the nature of dialogue within the novel as a genre, Bakhtin observes that dialogue as a phenomenon reveals a continuity of language premised on the latter's inescapable socio-historical freight:

> Novelistic dialogue is pregnant with an endless multitude of dialogic confrontations, which [. . .], as it were, only locally (as one out of many possible dialogues) illustrate this endless, deep–lying dialogue of languages; novel dialogue is determined by the very socio-ideological evolution of language and society. A dialogue of languages is a dialogue of social forces perceived not only in their static co-existence, but also as a dialogue of different times, epochs and days, a dialogue that is forever dying, living, being born: co-existence and becoming are here fused into an indissoluble concrete unity that is contradictory, multi-speeched and heterogeneous. (Bakhtin 1981: 365)

Although Bakhtin specifically identifies the object of his musings as the "novelistic dialogue," it is not hard to detect the broader theoretical position that Holquist rightly ascribes to *dialogism* as the "constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others [. . . .] The dialogic imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue" (Bakhtin 1981: 426).

Dialogism, as a conception of the linguistic tendency toward socio-historical continuity, entails the linking of expressive norms with the shaping of the verbal-ideological world (1981: 270–271). The verbal-ideological world is constituted by competing forces, the centripetal and the centrifugal, that manifest themselves – in the case of the first – in the attempts to reign-in language, to impose normative constraints on language use and thus on expression, and – in the case of the latter – on the reality of linguistic varieties, competing voices, and the organic [evolutionary] nature of language use. To speak of these opposing forces in particularized as well as general terms, Bakhtin uses the terms *heteroglossia*, by which he refers to the multiplicity of linguistic varieties or speaking styles, and *unitary language*, the normative consequences that result from the privileging of a particular language or speaking style, or, more generally, expressive form (270).

The nature of linguistic expression, and its close relationship to perception, thus gets addressed in term of competing ideological forces. Our expressive forms, that is, become vehicles for our ideological constructs in so far as they

adhere to the norms that delimit the meanings available to us.[1] The opposing forces are always at work in our expressive forms, and they speak to the desire for fixed meaning just as they speak to its elusiveness. *Dialogism*, as opposed to *monologism*, assumes that speakers and listeners have various expressive means and styles at their disposal, and that such a condition requires that they negotiate not only the code that enables intelligible communication but also the ideological factors that come with it. This understanding of language use as multiply oriented affirms that meaning is dynamic rather than static – every speaker is always expressing something in relation to what came before or in relation to other contexts, while simultaneously being part of the emergent context of which that speaker's speech act is a part. The fixity of a particular expressive form is as close as we can get to the fixity of meaning, but ultimately meaning transcends form, as my analysis of proverbs has shown. Although meaning is mutable – especially when it comes to figurative language – we nevertheless constantly try to approximate it. We do so by relying on previous meanings and discursive practices to the point that these eventually become normative features of our expressive forms. The emergence of expressive norms gives us the sense of a "common unitary language," a sense that is most apparent in the popular form of language use that ultimately gets recognized and labeled as the "standard" (way of speaking, representing, or even interpreting linguistic messages). However, the path of *unitary language* eventually leads to exclusion and expressive dead-ends because by *unitary language* Bakhtin doesn't simply mean a collection of basic linguistic symbols that ensure the bare meaning of mutual intelligibility "but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a *maximum* of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life" (271; emphasis in the original). Bakhtin's theory of oppositional forces thus explains the allure of the *unitary language* as well as the prevalence of *heteroglossia*. These two elements are essential aspects of language, and they force us to recognize verbal discourse as as a social phenomenon – "social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning" (259) – which has as a concomitant factor the presence of ideological foundations in regard to expressive forms. "Every utterance," Bakhtin impresses upon us, "participates

1 Bakhtin's emphasis on meaning as context-dependent is compatible with the theoretical positions of several other scholars, Foucault's episteme, Derrida's deconstruction, Hymes and Gumperz's ethnography of communication, and particularly with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which in its initial conception was rather extreme (i.e., claiming that our language's syntactic structure and lexicon determine what we can perceive) but it nevertheless led many scholars to consider the limitations imposed by the language-thought dynamic.

in the 'unitary language' (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces). Such is the fleeting language of a day, of an epoch, a social group, a school and so forth. It is impossible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language" (272).

Despite its characterization of language as persistent strife in the meaning-making enterprise, or perhaps because of it, Bakhtin's *dialogism* forces us to recognize that the appeals of particular expressive forms are ultimately context-dependent and socially determined because they are bound to particular social norms and conventions with historical foundations. This renders the notion of idealized forms suspect, for what may appear to be the height of expressive accuracy or beauty to one group may be mediocre or downright confusing to another. What is more troubling is that expressive forms – particularly linguistic practices – are so readily evaluated in socially-deterministic terms (e.g., one must speak English – even to the detriment of one's heritage language – in order to be empowered in the U.S.) or in essentializing terms (e.g., speaking styles or dialects are assumed to be indicative of intelligence). As discussed in more detail in the previous chapter, unquestioned preferences for one form over another keeps us from recognizing how expressive forms and rhetorical strategies are simply adaptations to the social contexts that spring them forth. The drive to establish a "unitary language" is essentially an exclusionary drive in so far as it involves delimiting the forms which are rendered acceptable (e.g., meaningfully recognizable), and this in itself may not be problematic because it is a response to practical needs. What is problematic, as I have been arguing, is the unmeasured impulse to assume that language is transparent or that expressive forms and meanings are universal, which often leads to the conclusion that one discourse community can assess the mental acuity of another's on the basis of unilateral standards. In other words, when an approach to a theory of meaning-making is dichotomized as either purely cognitive or purely contextualized, sight of their mutual interdependence is lost.

When Bakhtin writes about the tension between *heteroglossia* and *unitary language*, between the centrifugal and the centripetal forces in linguistic meaning-making, he is precisely orienting us to the **dialogic** nature of language – forcing us to see the preeminent role of context in the construction of meaning, and the implied importance of the historical accumulation, and consequent transformation, of meanings – so that we resist the inclination to set up a myopic standard of aesthetic/ linguistic/ expressive evaluation as we look to obviate misunderstanding.

As I have shown, the López social network's use of proverbs not only instantiates how semiotic and semantic continuity is facilitated by both the content and the form of these figurative expressions, but it also affords us an opportunity to see that even the most common forms of linguistic expression are quite complex when we truly examine the degree to which everyday language is figurative, while recognizing that figurative language simply approximates meaning rather than epitomizes it. But such complexity can easily be overlooked if this expressive form is readily dismissed as trite, quaint, vague or any other evaluative term that reveals the form's incompatibility with mainstream, academic, or simply external expressive standards. *Dialogism*'s characterization of language as a dynamic tension between expressive unification and disunification leads us to recognize how the accumulation of meaning (social, literal, figurative) makes these forms of expression only truly comprehensible once the socio-cultural context in which they are actually deployed is taken into consideration.

7.2. Matters of rhetoric

Bakhtin's *dialogism* helps bridge the gaps that otherwise remain in a consideration of oral traditions as socially-oriented discursive tools. For instance, we may ask, "What allows one oral tradition to persist while others are abandoned?" or "What constitutes shared perspective?" Bakhtin's suggestion that *dialogism* is the necessary consequence of the tension between *unitary language* and *heteroglossia* provides a way to think about language as a phenomenon that requires constant social interaction and negotiation in order to remain intelligible and useful. Members of a discourse community continue to build on the meanings that they have negotiated, but, in the process, they continue to transform their ways of speaking in order to make those ways useful according to new needs. Linking the concept of *dialogism* with classic and contemporary rhetorical concepts, such as *kairos*, *enthymeme*, and *style*, allows us to identify the means by which something like *dialogism* can function, and it ultimately confirms, as I have been arguing, that the meaning-making enterprise requires a felicitous relationship between cultural and linguistic competence as well as cognitive skills.

If at one point, following Aristotle's definition of rhetoric,[2] rhetoricians asked "what are the available means of persuasion?," today's rhetoricians for the most

2 Contemporary scholars (Bizzell and Herzberg 2001: 1; Kennedy 1998: 3; Kinneavy and Eskin 1994: 133) generally concur in observing that Aristotle's definition of rhetoric focuses just as much on the *means* of persuasion as on the *analytical ability* (i.e., faculty) to identify and to study those means.

part acknowledge that a privileged rhetorical tradition (such as the Greco-Roman one) and a parochial approach to a conception of rhetorical features anchored in "public speaking" or "writing features" are no longer viable in a society characterized by social and linguistic diversity, hybrid genres (e.g., personal "blogs" that engage in newscasting) emerging in conjunction with new broadcasting media (e.g., internet video streaming; real-time on-line discussion), and relatively unimpeded global and instantaneous communication. Correspondingly, modern rhetorical study focuses on the means of expression available to a given discourse community and has switched from a consideration of "rhetoric" in the singular to "rhetorics" in the plural to indicate that discourse communities differ and even compete with each other in their predilection for particular forms of expression. The discursive differences of those communities indicate that each community has its own standards of evaluation and interpretation that must be recognized and understood before they are judged in relation to another set of standards. Such a "new" orientation leads rhetorical study not only to document the variety of "rhetorics" that permeate social interaction, but also to posit that such rhetorics may be compared (viz. Domínguez Barajas 2007; Kassabgy et al. 2004; Kennedy 1998; Connor 1996) in order to anticipate points of discursive derailment that may result in cross-discursive contexts.

This orientation, however, does not necessarily mean that classical theoretical concepts have been abandoned. *Kairos*, for instance, is a concept in classical rhetoric that encapsulates the importance of recognizing context in order to communicate effectively. The term is itself a Greek word signifying the "opportune time" for – or "suitability of" – an action (Kinneavy 1986: 80; Kinneavy and Eskin 1994: 132). In order for a speaker to know when it is the right time to address an issue and how to address it suitably, contextual awareness is required, which, by extension, also requires cultural competency, for an action-linked-moment that might be perceived as suitable "timing" in one community may not be judged so in another. *Kairos*, as an attendant element in discursive practice, helps us understand how *dialogism* functions by foregrounding the competing forces of *unitary language* and *heteroglossia* in a speaker's impulse to contribute something new to the discursive mix while at that same attending to the normative factors that will afford the contribution on opportunity to be heard. To put it another way, *kairos*, as a concept assumes the tension between the speaker's unique personal contribution and ability and the demands of social convention, which dictate, among other things, when and what may be said (i.e., the norms of interaction are in place). The felicitous – although ephemeral – reconciliation of these competing forces is, presumably, what a good speaker was expected to achieve when he appeared before an audience and was expected to be mindful of context.

In terms of this study, the significance of *kairos* is perfectly illustrated in the use of proverbs by the members of the López social network. When they express an idea using a proverb, they are indexing their socio-cultural awareness just as they are demonstrating their individual rhetorical skills (i.e., the ability to select the most suitable proverbial expression for the situation at hand and utter that expression at the opportune time); as it was described in chapter 4, this rhetorical skill is openly appreciated by the interlocutors; the shared awareness of prevailing interpretive norms coupled with individual ability is at the heart of the pleasure that the uttering of proverbs often evokes.

Another rhetorical concept that proves useful in understanding how *dialogism* is manifested in everyday discourse is the enthymeme. Although the exact definition of the term has been debated perhaps since Aristotle claimed in *On Rhetoric* that enthymemic reasoning was the hallmark of rhetoric as syllogistic reasoning was the hallmark of dialectic (1355a), the understanding of what exactly is meant by "enthymeme" seems to be reaching a consensus. Killingsworth (2005 : 15), Danisch (2008: 229), Smith (2007: 115–117) and Burnyeat (1996: 91; 1994) observe that the enthymeme, as Aristotle intended, is more than merely a syllogism with an omitted premise, but rather it is argument that relies on implicit information, information that the audience is assumed to know.[3] Burnyeat's (1994) detailed historical tracing of the term leads to the uncovering of its root-word: *enthumēma* (*enthumēmata* in the plural), which Burnyeat glosses as "thought," "idea," or "consideration." Following that meaning, Burnyeat observes that "the cognate verb *enthumeisthai* means 'to think about something, consider it.'" The ideas in a speech are thoughts or considerations that the speaker wishes to communicate to the audience (11).

Burnyeat goes on to challenge the claims that enthymemes can be assumed to be truncated syllogisms – or that Aristotle even meant "a valid deductive argument" when he used the term *sullogismos* for that matter – and he places special emphasis (given the etymology of the word *ethymeme*) on his suggestion that when Aristotle mentions "that the enthymeme is *sullogismos tis*, a kind of

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3 Smith (2007) incorrectly characterizes Burnyeat's (1994) definition of the enthymeme in the vein of the "truncated syllogism" (albeit with the caveat that something is "held in the mind"), whereas Burnyeat's contention is precisely the opposite, claiming that the syllogism and the enthymeme are not only not necessarily related in form but they are certainly not related in kind, as the enthymeme is concerned with *enthumēmata*, which are the "considerations one is swayed by when reflecting on an issue *where conclusive argument is not to be had*" (12; my emphasis), whereas the syllogism is concerned with sound premises leading to a definitive and incontrovertible conclusion.

sullogismos [. . . .] [He] means neither more nor less than that an enthymeme, a consideration, is a sort of argument" (12).

Burnyeat's etymological analysis opens the door to the new consideration of the enthymeme as the elements that "are held in the mind" – not as omitted claims in the syllogistic structure, but as socio-cultural commonplaces that go unstated and are assumed by speakers to be understood by – and worked into the reasoning process of – the people that make up the audience for the argument presented.

In response to an apparently continued reluctance to see the enthymeme as something other than a syllogism with a repressed claim, Danisch (2008) actually articulates a conception of the enthymeme as a cultural assumption, the significance of which is quite important if we are to understand how rhetoric and dialectic differ and how the idea of the enthymeme also helps us further understand Bakhtin's conception of language as a phenomenon defined by equally balancing centripetal and centrifugal forces.

As if building on Burnyeat's etymological sleuthing, Danisch observes that

> The term *enthymeme* literally means "held in the mind," and enthymemes always have at least one claim that the members of a community believe or hold in common. So clear is the agreement on a shared claim that it might not even be stated explicitly in an argument. The persuasive power of the enthymeme, therefore, is produced by its ability to play on the commonly held assumptions of its audience. By leaving those assumptions unstated, an enthymeme bases its reasoning on "the inarticulate and unconscious judgment" of an audience. In contrast, the syllogism, although it may be thought of as similar in structure, explicitly states each of its premises (major and minor) and tries to derive truths about which we can be certain. While the enthymeme acknowledges that our "unconscious judgments" may change over time and are subject to circumstance, context, and occasion, the syllogism assumes that it uses premises that are universally, transhistorically, and aculturally true. (229)

The importance of this understanding of the *enthymeme* is that it accounts for the cultural competence that assumes as commonplace particular behaviors, references, values, and the reasoning that the complex combination of these elements derive. Given this understanding, we can see how Aristotle's analytical consideration of rhetoric is informed by an awareness of socio-cultural context that sets this "art" apart from "dialectic" (or "pure" logic) in as much as the two are concerned with different approaches in the consideration of topics. Rhetoric is concerned with reaching an audience whereas dialectic is concerned with reaching a conclusion.

Awareness of the "things that are kept in the mind" of an audience, or, to put it in my terms, the socio-cultural bases informing an expression, is yet another element in the theoretical cache of rhetoric that speaks to the central issues

in Bakhtin's conception of language. In other words, enthymemic reasoning is another means by which the miscommunication that may result from competing discourses is negotiated and even circumvented. And in more particular terms, it is in the proverb that we have a concrete instance of enthymemic reasoning in accordance with what Burnyeat tells us. Proverbs pose "considerations" that should be kept in mind as part of an argument or commentary made in regard to a given topic or issue. But the impact of the "consideration" depends on the weight of the socio-contextual elements it carries. It is only through unpacking the socio-cultural context that defines the enthymemic reasoning involved in a particular rhetorical situation that we can understand how the performance of a socially-sanctioned expression, such as the proverb, can have the equivalent effect – in rhetorical terms – on an audience as the presentation of a sound logical proof can have on determining a fact.

Finally, in the consideration of rhetorical elements that inform our understanding of Bakhtin's theoretical notion of *dialogism*, the matter of style is so significant that it deserves to be discussed at length in the ensuing and final section of this chapter.

7.3. Matters of style

As described in chapter 3, there is a very telling moment when Tita walks in on the rest of her family right around supper time and finds them ready to proceed without her. She utters an interjection (*ay*) and a declarative sentence ("you are ready to eat") which are met with a proverb that justifies the behavior to which Tita is implicitly objecting. In that chapter, and in keeping with the general focus on the importance of context on meaning, I pointed out the socio-cognitive framework that enabled the felicitous interpretation of both utterances, Tita's comment and Ana's proverb. I allude to that instance once again to continue to address the tension between *heteroglossia* (the impulse to decentralize meaning) and *unitary language* (the impulse to centralize meaning) that Bakhtin alerts us to. This, time, however, I do so by considering the tension between contextualization and abstraction through another prominent theoretical framework in discourse analysis (the discursive pragmatics of Brown and Levinson), if only to show that the two forces influencing the meaning-making enterprise do indeed manifest themselves in the various dimensions of any given discursive phenomenon. I then turn the discussion to stylistic concerns to confirm how the impulse to generate what Bakhtin calls a "unitary language" ultimately leads to the privileging of a particular ideological perspective that, in effect, is the foundation for distinguishing between discourse communities.

As mentioned in chapter 3, there is an apparent discursive incompatibility between Tita's declarative comment and Ana's figurative (i.e., proverbial) response in so far as they do not share explicit referents. The utterances' compatibility is nevertheless patent because the interlocutors and all those present recognize that the communicative exchange is felicitous. This leads us to ask not only what constitutes relevance in a given communicative exchange but also how that relevance is established. To put it more directly, "How do people know how to interpret comments that aren't overtly related (as by the repetition of referents)?" As discussed in chapter 3, interpretations are premised on inferences, and inferences are, in turn, based on familiarity with discrete referents and the sociocultural norms that constitute the interpretive context, or what Hymes (1974: 54–64) calls the norms of interpretation and interaction. In the case described above, one of the key factors contributing to the selection of the right norm of interpretation for Ana was Tita's lilting opening interjection (*ay*) which indexed as playful mood, and Ana's knowledge of the norms of interaction prompted her to utter the proverbial expression as a suitable, albeit indirect, response to Tita's direct observation – but equally indirect criticism. This simple example may suffice to make the larger point, which is that norms of interaction guide our behavior, and many of those norms evolve to preclude conflict. In particular, norms of politeness are complex linguistic and physical gestures that have a place in discourse analysis in so far as knowledge of them is crucial in understanding how messages are interpreted or why particular discursive practices are adhered to.

In the case of Tita's and Ana's exchange, Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1978) would have us see the indirect communicative quality of the proverb as problematic. That is, Brown and Levinson, in their search for behavioral/discursive universals propose that the idea of politeness is one such. In fact, politeness is manifested, according to them, in patterned communicative ways, so much so that they propose that politeness is often characterized by the use of linguistic strategies that minimize the potential of embarrassing an interlocutor. Building their theory on Goffman's (1967) notion of "face-saving"[4]

4 Goffman (1967: 5) defines *face* "as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" and adds, in less technical terms, that it is a phenomenon that involves personal dignity and respect for others on the basis of emotional co-identifcation. As Goffman puts it, the member of any group is "disinclined to witness the defacement of others. The person who can witness another's humiliation and unfeelingly retain a cool countenance himself is said in our society to be 'heartless,' just as he who can unfeelingly participate in his own defacement is thought to be 'shameless"' (1967: 10–11). Brown and Levinson (1978: 66) offer a more succinct definition of *face* in

as a primary concern in social interaction, Brown and Levinson observe that indirection or subtlety (which they call an *off record* strategy) in potentially face-threatening communicative exchanges is more likely unless the interlocutors are either intimates or unequals, in which case a directness that is seen as unconcerned with face-saving is what's expected. For instance, family members, because of their intimacy, may not be concerned with each others' face-saving needs and may commonly utter requests as directives (e.g., "pass me the salt") without the politeness markers (e.g., "please" and "thank you") that mitigate the face-threatening potential involved in such utterances. Similarly, when the power differential is well-established, the unequal social status of interlocutors allows the interlocutor acting as the superordinate to speak without resorting to politeness markers when addressing a subordinate. Brown and Levinson refer to the style of speaking that omits common politeness markers as *bald-on-record*.

According to this theory, Tita and Ana, because they are siblings, and thus peers, interacting in the intimacy of their home and family on a daily basis, should have used a *bald-on-record* speaking style with each other instead of an "indirect" one. Brown and Levinson's theory, however, anticipates the situation in which both Tita and Ana would use an indirect way of communicating instead of a *bald-on-record* register, despite the social elements just mentioned. As part of their theory, Brown and Levinson (1978: 79–81) acknowledge that there are degrees of politeness, and the extent to which politeness is emphasized is precisely linked to the factors of social distance (interlocutors' [un]familiarity with each other), power differential (interlocutors' hierarchical position in regard to one another), and ranking of cultural/situational imposition (to what degree an act is seen as face-threatening within a community) surrounding the communicative exchange.[5] The instance of Tita's indirectness and Ana's use of a proverb supports Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, but it also offers another way to consider the discursive and rhetorical dimensions surrounding proverb use within the López social network. That way is the consideration of sociological values extending beyond the immediate lens of politeness. If politeness theory is primarily concerned with the ways in which group members communicate to each other their respect (and thus promote the preservation of

claiming it to be "the public self-image that every member [of a group] wants to claim for himself" (with the understood implication that the desired self-image is per force a positive one in the eyes of others).

5 The 1987 edition of Brown and Levinson's theory added commentary and an expanded bibliography to the original work. In regard to the ranking of imposition, they admit that the "gravity" factor involves in-depth cultural knowledge, as "gravity" may be affected by – among other things – even the presence of third parties, religious beliefs, or other culturally specific elements (12).

face), the overarching concern of a general theory of discourse is how various discursive practices are linked to the ideological mechanisms that perpetuate the integrity of particular communities.

For instance, Farr (2006) – whose ethnographic project also focuses on *mexicanos* from Michoacán – links the discursive style of her informants with a particular ideological orientation: one of individualist progress in conjunction with familism and network-based reciprocity (165). The argument that style indexes ideology is something that contemporary rhetorical scholars have also proposed, especially in the last 20 years. Briefly put, the argument is that adopting a particular communicative style aligns speakers – just as it identifies them – with a particular social group and, by extension, with that group's economic and political ethos, among many other possible social dimensions (viz. McIntosh 1998: 228–231; Smith 1984). For instance, in comparing the choice between loose and periodic sentences in the writing of prominent 18th century English writers, Carey McIntosh implies that the analysis of stylistic choice solely on the basis of aesthetic or formal grounds can easily preclude an examination of the ideological orientation informing particular aesthetic standards. In his discussion, McIntosh cites Francis Christensen, the influential rhetoric and composition scholar who argues in one of the essays making up his landmark *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric* for a rhetorical shift in the writing instruction paradigm. Christensen (1978: 33) observed that relatively contemporary writing instructors still hold as the ideal the clearly crafted periodic sentence that characterized 18th century English prose instead of the loose sentence that characterized the prose of the 17th century. Christensen considers the loose (cumulative) sentence more in tune with modern conceptions of meaning making because its layered syntax suggests conceptual elaboration rather than the finiteness of the periodic sentence which, as its name implies, deliberately "delays its most important element to the last few words" and thus suggests a prescience that does not correspond, in Christensen's view, to natural discourse (McIntosh 1998: 76). Christensen objected to the periodic sentence's paradigmatic role, and expressed his favor for the loose sentence in this way:

> The cumulative sentence is the opposite of the periodic sentence. It does not represent the idea as conceived, pondered over, reshaped, packaged, and delivered cold. It is dynamic rather than static, representing the mind thinking. The main clause [. . .] exhausts the mere fact of the idea; logically, there is nothing more to say. The additions stay with the same idea, probing its bearings and implications, exemplifying it or seeking an analogy or metaphor for it, or reducing it to details. (Christensen 1978: 23)

The issue at the heart of stylistic concerns is not simply that there are different aesthetic qualities, but rather that a shift in aesthetic qualities and standards

are indicative of a collective ideological shift. In this regard, Christensen posits that "the Senecan [discursive] amble banished from England when 'the direct sensuous apprehension of thought' (T. S. Eliot's words) gave way to Cartesian reason or intellect" (33). Christensen at this point defers to Morris W. Croll, who explains "the consequences of this shift in sensibility" thusly:

> To this mode of thought we are to trace almost all the features of modern literary education and criticism, or at least of what we should have called modern a generation ago: the study of the precise meaning of words; the reference to dictionaries as literary authorities; the study of the sentence as a logical unit alone; the careful circumscription of its limits and the gradual reduction of its length; . . . [*] the attempt to reduce grammar to an exact science; the idea that forms of speech are always either correct or incorrect; the complete subjection of the laws of motion and expression in style to the laws of logic and standardization – in short, the triumph, during two centuries, of grammatical over rhetorical ideas. (Style, Rhetoric and Rhythm, p. 232) (* The omitted item concerns punctuation and is not relevant here. In using this scale, note the phrase "what we should have called modern a generation ago" and remember that Croll was writing in 1929. [Christensen's note]) (As quoted in Christensen 1978: 39)

The work of rhetoricians such as McIntosh, Christensen, and Croll reveals that stylistic concerns are important not only because they address matters of creativity and uniqueness of expression but also because they help us understand how expressive means index ideological foundations. When a speaking style is thus theoretically considered, as the use of proverbs has been considered here, the link between the rhetorical and the social becomes apparent. Expressive choices are far from being haphazard or inconsequential; those expressive choices get codified into styles that may, in turn, be recognized and adopted by a discourse community, eventually becoming the means by which culture is manifested and regenerated on a continuous basis. In effect, such socio-communicative styles are a manifestation of the impulse toward a *unitary language* that, according to Bahktin, ultimately leads to the privileging of a particular ideological perspective, and which, I, in turn, argue, distinguishes one discourse community from another.

Farr's (2006) ethnographic work furthers my claim, as its analysis of the distinctive speaking style of the members of another transnational Mexican community not only undermines the stereotypical depiction of the Mexican farm laborer as a submissive and generally reticent peon, but it informs her readers of the link between speaking style and ideological orientation. In *Rancheros in Chicagoacán*, Farr conducts an insightful analysis of the social dimensions of language use among members of the community she studied, and one of the most important observations that she makes is that the community of *mexicanos*

that she interacted with – their rural origin and limited formal education not withstanding – are far from being timid and reticent for they prefer a *bald-on-record* style that she refers to as *franqueza* (frankness). Interlocutors who use that style tend to be very direct and pride themselves in "not beating around the bush" (162). Such an admission of pride in their speaking style indicates a self awareness of the importance of the expressive in bolstering ideological views. Something that must be emphasized, however, is that there are stylistic repertoires within communities, and that when people speak they select the style that is – in their estimation – the most appropriate for the situation. Accordingly, it would be a mistake to assume that a community is limited to one particular expressive style, but in practice, as Farr suggests, a community may embrace a characteristic style, a style that is perceived as the most common or privileged within the group and which can be assumed, ultimately, to index the dominant ideology within the group.

In regard to this last point, it bears mentioning that while Farr is perfectly right in identifying *franqueza* as the preferred speaking style among the *rancheros* she studied, the López social network's preference for proverbs, even in the most intimate settings of the family and the home, suggests that *cortesía* – observed as the stylistic antipole of *franqueza* – was for them, if not the default, then at least a commonly chosen discursive mode. Moreover, the surface features of *cortesía* and *franqueza* may seem to put them at odds, as *cortesía* is characterized by circumlocution, subtlety and the "formality" that links it historically and etymologically to "courtly" speech; whereas *franqueza* is characterized as "direct, straightforward, candid language that goes directly to a point" (Farr 2006: 162). However, a more patient consideration of the ideological foundations of the two styles links them in regard to autonomy. That is, if *cortesía* is concerned with manifesting courtesy, which in turn is understood to be behavior in speech and action that is intended to express respect and consideration among interactants, then *cortesía* is concerned with avoiding impositions on others; that is, it is a speaking style that is concerned with respecting the interlocutors' autonomy. *Franqueza* is also concerned with autonomy (Farr 2006: 174), but it is focused primarily on the autonomy of the speaker. This orientation to the audience must be understood before one can begin to explain the choice of a particular speaking style, especially when there are several to choose from in a speaker's repertoire.

In regard to the analysis of discursive style, therefore, one must be knowledgeable of the cultural particulars that undergird the expressive styles. For instance, Farr's primary concern with autonomy as an ideological foundation is itself linked to the cultural particulars of the transnational group she studied, a group that like the López social network is culturally Mexican. The two groups' ideological characteristic discursive styles (i.e., instantiations of *franqueza* and

cortesía) are premised on respect, oriented toward affirming one's autonomy or recognizing the autonomy of others. Notions of respect are integrally tied to the national, and by extension the cultural, Mexican identity by actively linking the idea to iconographic national figures such as Benito Juárez, by permanently displaying the latter's famous quotation concerning the relationship between respect and peace alongside defining national symbols, and by institutionalizing it in the patriotic discourse that gets instilled in every child attending public school.

The iconographic role of Benito Juárez in the collective historical imagination stems from his preeminent liberal political agenda and defiance in the face of conservative domestic opposition and foreign incursions onto Mexican soil during the second half of the 19th century. In addition to being the first Mexican president of indigenous ancestry, he opposed the privileges of the church, the military, and worked to shift power from the racial creole minority to the mestizo majority. That a member of the disempowered ethnic group challenged the barriers of racism as early as 1858 to reach the highest office of the land and went on to champion social reform has always fascinated the Mexican collective imagination, and it earned Juárez his mythical political persona. His rise to power is thus characterized by noble aims, which at their base have the basic principle of respect for the rights of others. In fact, he is remembered to this day for his renowned statement: "*El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz*" [Respect for the rights of others means peace].

Juárez died in office while trying to stave off Porfirio Díaz's armed resistance to the former's embattled presidency. After attaining the coveted presidential chair, Díaz undermined much of the social progress thus far attained, and he established a social policy that favored the elite and led to the social and economic oppression of the masses for the length of his 35-year dictatorship. After the revolution of 1910 put an end to Díaz's rule, Juárez's simple, yet profound statement got adopted as a motto that permeated 20th century Mexican democratic governments claiming to further Juárez's social reform. To this day, Juárez's famous phrase remains literally etched above the enormous dual flags that spread like eagle wings at the fore of the federal congressional chamber (*cámara de diputados* [chamber of deputies (i.e., representatives)]). Juárez's notion of *respect* as a foundational value in the furthering of harmonious social interaction thus became iconized, and, as a result of being integrated into the official political discourse of the land, it also became a culturally prominent idea.

Once the official political discourse claimed *respect* as a foundational value that ensured peace, the discourse got disseminated throughout the social institutions that are under the government's control, particularly the schools whose mandate includes instilling in the youth of the country their national Mexican

identity. As a consequence, children are continuously reminded and required to know who Benito Juárez was and what his philosophical statement means. Thus it is not surprising to find that practically every Mexican citizen of school-attending age and beyond is not only familiar with Juárez's pronouncement on respect but also considers its message part of the Mexican cultural identity.

Awareness of such cultural particulars help us understand why particular discourses and, consequently, speaking styles are adopted within communities. At the heart of discursive choices are ideological foundations that can unite or divide members of a social group, and which can further be claimed to be the basis for perceptions of reality in so far as ideological constructs inform a person's understanding of events, motives, and even outcomes. It is not an exaggeration, then, to say that discursive practices define social groups in so far as they are the primary means by which the groups assert their distinctive basis of cohesion.

The claim that discourse constructs reality perhaps merits clarification, as the claim does not necessarily imply that everything is subjective. As Klapproth (2004: 37–38) has pointed out, when social-constructionists and ethnomethodologists argue for the social construction of reality they do not mean that everything that is perceived through the senses is ultimately subject to debate, for surely there are things that we all experience as a reality – particularly physical phenomena. For example, those who are not sensorily impaired will acknowledge that it is easier to see our surroundings when there is light than when there isn't, or that what they feel when they drink water is the fluid going down their throat, regardless of whether any particular person then attributes an abstract significance to that physical sensation (e.g., replenishing the soul, body, or mind).

Thus, from a theoretical perspective, discourse is at the base of the construction of reality because it is through discourse that we attribute *significance* to the phenomenon experienced. The process of signification is the product of a multifaceted interaction between the senses, the means of expression available, and the extent to which we share those means with others. As it has been argued in this book, the universality of normal mental processes that cognitive science alerts us to is one of those facets, but equally important is the need to express what is perceived, and, as sociolinguists and ethnomethodologists in general, have stressed, culture influences greatly in the expression and interpretation of the phenomena that shape our lived experienced.

Epilogue

In this work I have stressed that the divisions between the social uses of language and the considerations of the cognitive elements at work in everyday language use must be bridged for the sake of advancing new theoretical perspectives concerning discourse, socio-cognitive issues, and the literacy instruction of ethnic and linguistic minority students, particularly those of Mexican origin in mainstream U.S. contexts. I have shown how a U.S.-Mexican social network makes use of an oral tradition to (re)create the social and cultural landscape of its place of origin regardless of the distance in time and space between them. The use of this oral tradition, the utterance of proverbs, in addition to its affective and expressive communicative functions, reveals the complexity of thought that is the hallmark of human cognition but which is often perceived to be the exclusive domain of the formally educated or of the dominant socio-economic sector (i.e., the "mainstream") of our society. That an apparently simple form of verbal art that dates back to ancient times and can be found in numerous cultures requires the use of higher order thinking skills, speaks to the universality of the cognitive skills that are often the prime goal of most teacher-student interaction. Hence, despite the absence of concrete data on proverb-use by children, I have endeavored to link matters of schooling to this analysis of proverb-use as discursive practice because it should be apparent that this practice is a part of the expressive economy of a community, and, as such, this practice should be seen as having plausible discursive influence on the school-age children who are part of the ethnolinguistic community depicted in this book, and perhaps many like it.

This knowledge compels educators not to regard students of ethnic minority background as deficient in thinking or in linguistic skills, but as purveyors of these in the different guises that constitute their linguistic repertoire. This shift in orientation is more likely to lead to a change in pedagogical philosophy that will make the classroom experience more hospitable for ethnic minority students in general, and, in particular, such a shift will presumably help curve, to some degree, the statistical slope of scholastic desertion among Latino students by making their educational experience less alienating.

In addition to the cognitive dimensions of proverb use, and similar discursive practices, there are other areas of focus that appear to hold promising information for educators seeking to better serve ethnic minority populations in the U.S. The following is a modest list of them.

1. Socialization practices

When and with what age groups proverbs are used may be indicative of stages in socialization. The level of abstraction that is often involved in proverbial expression requires a considerable degree of sophistication, and this entails a degree of lived experience and maturity that often places the person who successfully processes proverbs beyond childhood age. That is, once individuals are perceived to be ready for adulthood and assume the corresponding responsibilities, it is contradictory to those expectations to continue to treat those individuals as children by giving them direct behavioral instruction. Nevertheless, adolescents, for one, still have to be guided in terms of social expectations and behavior because they have not reached the status of fully mature – and hence autonomous – members of a society. Because proverbs can function as indirect didactic expressions, they can serve as a tool that allows for the communication of socializing principles without threatening to lower the status of the individual who is the target of instruction (cf. Obeng 1996).

This idea is supported by Brown and Levinson's (1978) notion of *face* in politeness theory. The fact that proverbs can be used by peers to evaluate – and presumably thus correct – each other's behavior speaks to the importance of indirectness as a politeness strategy. That is, the act of criticism among equals fosters the possibility of conflict because the evaluator makes a claim that has the potential to affect the social status of the one evaluated. Since there is an implicit threat to social status in the act of criticism, the use of a proverb to distance the speaker from the criticism expressed diminishes the potential for strife. Brown and Levinson (1978: 66) speak of *face* as "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction." They thus clarify that what is being considered in relation to *face* is an emotional aspect among interactants, and they make the further distinction that there are two kinds of *face*: *negative face* and *positive face*. The former relates to an interactant's desire to not be imposed upon or restricted, and the latter relates to the desire to be appreciated or approved of. In the case of proverbs, the indirect nature of these expressions when used to criticize or censure in the form of advice, as I demonstrated in chapter 4, supports the notion of *negative face* in so far as the person to whom the proverb is directed is not told outright what needs to be corrected and is thus not imposed upon directly, but that person is given the option to accept or reject the message by engaging in the deciphering of the proverb and acknowledging its relevance to himself or herself. In addition, the generic nature of the proverb suggests that the authorship of the criticism or evaluation is not the speaker of the proverb but the social collective that invested the proverb with meaning and perpetuated its currency.

Further research on the actual values expressed in proverbs and the evaluative situations in which they are employed could reveal socialization practices among different groups that may have direct bearing on inter-cultural communication, interaction, and instruction. One area that I imagine might be rather instructive is the point at which proverbs are used by older members of a social group to communicate ideas to younger ones, and when the members of a social group start using proverbs to communicate ideas regardless of age. I imagine that this would not only tell us about individuals' transitions in social status within their groups, but also about intra-group membership and the embracing of group identity as individuals begin to emulate their elders.

2. Identity formation

Intra-group membership and identity are most clearly related to language and its forms of expression than perhaps any other social factor. This is particularly clear in the U.S. where the term "Hispanic" is used in official matters to group a variety of peoples simply because they presumably share a language, despite their many differences in culture, phenotype, and geographical point of origin (which, in this case, may be any of the countries that make up two thirds of the western hemisphere). For extensive purposes, in the term Hispanic, the Spanish language has come to consolidate race, geographical origin, and culture among people of Latin American origin in the U.S. What is even more vexing in the context of the U.S., is that ethnic minorities can be fully assimilated in cultural terms but still be discriminated on the basis of race, so that in the case of Hispanic/Latinos, whose identity is characterized by their connection to the Spanish language, we still see that regardless of the distance they might have to this identifying factor (i.e., they might be monolingual in English or might be fourth or fifth generation U.S. citizens), they can and are still discriminated against in terms of phenotype. The concept of language in this sense, then, can be seen as a term that begins to encapsulate "otherness" or "foreignness," and this is another crucial issue that can be explored in term of socio-cognitive research.

As I have shown in the preceding chapters, language is intrinsically tied to the way we think because thought and language are co-dependent. The study of oral traditions can further the study of socio-cognitive research by revealing other connections between language and thought at the community level. That is, an examination of language use and its distinctive traits among different ethnic groups may reveal how intra-group memberships are conceived, defined, communicated, supported, and dissolved. Such findings would be particularly helpful in understanding a variety of socio-communicative phenomena that may be con-

ducive to counteracting negative social trends. A case in point is that of scholastic desertion among Latinos, of which Flores-González (2002) writes in terms of identity formation that is either scholastically compatible or incompatible.

In her discussion of the development of a "school" or "street" identity among Latino students, Flores-González makes the observation that among the many social factors (e.g., social support, prestige, rewards) involved in the formation of an academically-oriented identity or a streetwise persona, the individual perception of the experiences surrounding school-based encounters plays a role in the outcome of behavior, and the behavior manifested in regard to these encounters becomes a supporting factor in the formation of a personal identity that is either school or street oriented. "Students who do not fit the ["school-kid"] mold, because of personal and family characteristics[,] and/or those who are experiencing difficulties at home[,] are more vulnerable to interpreting ordinary events at school as attacks. Thus, it may be that school kids and street kids give different meaning to similar events" (2002: 42). To clarify, Flores-González clearly refers to students forming an interpretation of events based on actual previous acts and not specifically on linguistic communication, but given that social encounters are almost invariably accompanied by linguistic exchange, it seems relevant to consider how "school-kids" and "street-kids," to borrow her terms, differ in their perception of communicative cues. That is, what is it about the way something is communicated at school that can make some students perceive the message as an attack while others simply perceive it as an ordinary communicative act? In this sense, the importance of the socio-cognitive interplay on perception would seem to be quite important since such knowledge would inform us of the meta-communicative factors involved in a communicative exchange that goes awry. Equally important and relevant to this research would be to explore how students actually articulate their ethnolinguistic identity, and how this articulation is either shared (supported and reiterated) or not by peers and other members of the immediate community, as well as how this articulation reveals the separation or integration of various factors (e.g., ethnicity, social class, gender, race, origin, etc.) relating to a successful or an unsuccessful academic career.

The importance of detailed research on the manipulation of language across Latino groups is important, particularly in questions relating to identity formation. To not pay attention to the diversity of language use across Latino groups is to fall into the trap of reification whereby the expeditious grouping of Spanish-speaking groups into the pan-ethnic Hispanic group is justified and perpetuated, and this is tantamount to saying that the peoples of England, Australia, New Zealand, and most of the U.S. share an identity because they all speak English.

3. Maintenance, loss, or transformation of oral traditions in U.S. contexts

Given the importance of socio-linguistic and empirical evidence on claims involving identity formation among members of ethnic groups, another area of research that looms relevant to socio-cognitive research is the exploration of the maintenance, loss, or transformation of the oral traditions of the various ethnic groups in the U.S. In particular, the work I have presented thus far would be furthered by an exploration of the maintenance of oral traditions, particularly that of proverbs, among *mexicanos*. I presented data that specifically address language use among a social network of *mexicanos* in an effort to show how examination of a particular oral tradition among a particular social group can reveal complex socio-cognitive and linguistic skills and strategies that can inform educational practices and other research areas. An examination of whether oral traditions are maintained, transformed, or lost over the course of one or more generations – particularly among immigrant populations who are removed from their geographic and societal points of origin – might reveal some prominent processes and factors affecting identity formation and social cohesion, as well as reveal instances of what Goodwin and Wenzel (1979: 289) term socio-logic (i.e., "a socially developed sense of practical reasoning") and how such a socio-logic is transformed, lost, or maintained.

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