The C-Or-DiAL Corpus (Corpus Oral Didático Anotado Linguisticamente) and teaching Spanish as a foreign language

Carlota NICOLÀS MARTINEZ (Università di Firenze)

It is my aim to demonstrate how the C-Or-DiAL Corpus can be used practically and concretely in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language. In particular, I will be focusing on how the transcription of spoken discourse can serve as a means to gaining awareness of the oral language.

The activities the learners carry out are the following:

• Intense listening tasks require learners to identify accurately characteristics of the spoken language such as changes in tone, retracting and giving up one's turn.
• The segmentation involved in transcription tasks leads learners to recognize the isolatable elements (not solely words) which constitute the language.

The close-up examination of the oral text which transcription entails induces the learner to reflect on both familiar and unfamiliar characteristics of the language. In particular, she will be encouraged to recognize how her understanding of texts necessarily, containing elements beyond her control, is made possible by abilities of a pragmatic nature. She will also realize how processing uncontrolled text may rely on prosody. Finally, she may find that understanding the communicative intentions of the speaker may require an appreciation of discourse dynamics such as holding the floor , interrupting, and so forth. The student will practice recognizing in a fragment of speech the information crucial for determining the key words and the theme [i.e. theme/rheme?; topic?]. To this end strategies are employed which permit the identification of elements that characterize the topic of the text, such as the presence of certain semantic fields.

Other teaching objectives of transcription include the attainment of a transcription which truly reflects the audio input, the technical ability to produce an accurate markup, and finally precision and attention to detail in the preparation of the transcription for publication.

The learner is motivated to perform these complex and difficult tasks by the knowledge that his transcription will be included in the C-Or-DiAL and subsequently used by other learners. To facilitate study by future users, transcriptions of fragments are accompanied by indications of communicative functions. Learners are provided with a list of such functions and asked to identify those in the text which are most salient, that is, those that characterize the text and that will enable future users to form a clear idea of what linguistic material can be used to perform a particular communicative task.

The difficulty of the audio fragment given to each level of learner depends on various factors:

• the number of participants
• the level of shared knowledge among speakers
• the degree of specialization of the language
• to what extent the speakers are members of a language sectorial community.

Difficulties in assigning fragments emerge only at the A level. From B1 onwards learners can count on the basic ability to understand and transcribe all manner of texts; it is merely a question of how much work will be involved.