‘¡Uy!, ¿quién pidió pollo?’
A qualitative analysis of the *piropo* practice among construction workers in Bogotá, Colombia

Héctor Ramírez-Cruz, Nataly Correa and Jennifer Mancera

Abstract
This paper analyzes the discursive practice of *piropos* performed by construction workers and addressed to female pedestrians in Bogotá, Colombia. Following an interactional sociolinguistic approach, the paper investigates the distinctive features of the *piropo* practice within this group. The investigators collected 87 naturalistic interactions and 40 interviews of speakers using ethnographic techniques. The analysis includes the study of the content and the form of *piropos* along with body language and the general performance of the speaker and the addressee. The results show that the speakers follow the patterns of *piropo* interactions in the Hispanic culture, even though they use specific features for the preparatory acts, the enunciation, and the offset of *piropos*. The observational data suggest that the practice is grounded on *machismo* ideologies that trigger public deployment of masculinity. On the other hand, interview data display speakers’ perceptions of *piropos* as a flirtatious activity and a verbal game. The paper provides naturalistic evidence of the *piropo* practice in a Hispanic context and contributes to the discussion of gender roles in the public space.

**KEYWORDS:** interactional sociolinguistics, *piropo*, Hispanic culture, construction workers, *machismo*, public space, Bogotá (Colombia)

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1 Introduction

Unlike compliments between parents and children, employers and employees, or teachers and students, *piropos* are forms of flirtatious speech that suggest some virtual erotic interest in another (Andrews, 1977:58; Suárez-Orozco and Dundes, 1990:18; Schreier, 2005:65; Malaver and González, 2008:267). However, compliments and *piropos* are not discrete categories, as depicted in Figure 1 (see here below). On the one hand, participants display positive politeness strategies to compliment (Cordella, Large, and Pardo, 1995:235) in structured and unstructured settings (Rees-Miller, 2011:2679) where participants fulfill specific functions (e.g. boss-worker), share goal-oriented tasks (e.g. a project), or join leisure activities (e.g. a party). In compliments, participants share some background but they do not have to align in age, gender, or sexual orientation. Moreover, in compliments reciprocal responses from the addressees are expected (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001; Holmes, 1988:459–462), serving to enhance social cohesion.

![Figure 1. Compliments and piropos.](image)

*Piropos*, on the other hand, usually take place in unstructured settings between participants who are unknown to each other (Andrews, 1977:50). Although the available evidence is formed of *piropos* said by men and addressed to women (e.g. Moore, 1996; Achugar, 2001, 2002; Lundgren, 2013), *piropos* can happen between participants of any gender (for homosexual *piropos*, see Calvo Pérez, 2005:40). Given the anonymity of the encounter, *piropos* are often heard on the streets and in other public spaces with no expectation of reciprocal response from
the addressee (Achugar, 2001:130; Lopera Medina, 2015: 5). The anonymous and
current nature of *piropos* explains the impoliteness displayed by *piroperos* – ‘those
who shout *piropos*’ – who threaten the addressee’s image by bringing her personal
characteristics into public scrutiny (Brown and Levinson, 1987:66–67). There is
an overlap between *piros* and compliments as complimenters can display
sexual interest in their target; however, compliments are not submitted to public
scrutiny and participants share some background (e.g. strangers dancing at a
disco).

1.1 *Piropos* in the Hispanic culture
Although Kissling (1991) has shown cross-cultural similarities of flirtatious
speech on the streets, the genesis and original adornment of the linguistic form
make Hispanic *piropos* culturally specific, as pointed out by Achugar (2001:127).
The origin of Hispanic *piropos* is attributed to medieval oral traditions known as
Romance ballads that were publicly sung by *trovadores* ‘folk singers’ praising
female beauty (Gaytan Sánchez, 2009:151–152; Venclovská, 2006:11–12). As
stated by Carvajal Ríos (2014:27), the practice must have arrived in Latin
America via colonization. Some written evidence of the practice can be seen in
collections of medieval Spanish ballads (Menéndez Pidal, 1998; Alonso Asenjo,
1990) and anthologies from other Spanish-speaking countries, such as those
analyzed by Achugar (2001).

Achugar (2001) used a corpus of examples extracted from three anthologies to
analyze the social practice of *piropos* and their metaphorical content. Achugar
outlined its generic features including the contextual conditions of this practice
(public spaces), its general social purposes (expressing erotic attraction and
displaying verbal artistry), the participants involved (often a male *piropero* and a
female addressee), and its stages (the utterance and its avoidance). She pointed
out the metaphorical content of Hispanic *piropos* that depict women as food,
vehicles, and divine creatures. Moreover, she described the conceptual metaphor
of love that underlies *piropos* in Latin cultures: love as hunting, men as hunters,
and women as prey.

Similarly, Suárez-Orozco and Dundes (1984) analyzed other metaphors
underlying *piropos*. The ‘Don Juan’ metaphor portrays Hispanic male *piroperos*
as ever flirty. The ‘virgin’, the ‘mum’, and the ‘prostitute’ metaphors represent
female addressees as ideal women, protective beings, and objects of sexual
satisfaction, respectively. These underlying metaphors are assumed to express,
implicitly or explicitly, *piropos*’ focus on communicating attraction towards the
addressee.
1.2 Piropo types and the interpretation of the content

A distinction between decent or nice piropos and rude piropos or antipiropos has been proposed (Andrews, 1977:54–55; Malaver and González, 2008; Lopera Medina, 2015). Decent piropos are not offensive and contain no slang – e.g. ¡se están cayendo los ángeles del cielo! ‘angels are falling from heaven!’ Rude piropos are crude explicit remarks – e.g. ¡la de verde, agáchese y me lo muerde! ‘The one in green, bend down and suck it to me!’ Although this classification serves the analysis of the topic and the content of piropos, we find it useless not only because the decent/rude interpretation may be a subjective analysis, but also because such interpretation may depend on the addressee’s perception of piropos and non-verbal cues (e.g. noises, gazes, postures) used by the speaker (Lundgren, 2013:12–15). Therefore, a ‘decent’ piropo may be perceived as rude and a ‘rude’ piropo may not be considered rude depending on who says it and how it is said.

Furthermore, the historical interpretation of ‘decent’ and ‘rude’ piropos is not straightforward. Venclovská (2006:13–15) considers ‘decent’ piropos as romantic flirtatious speech from the Middle Ages and ‘rude’ piropos as a recent deterioration of the practice. However, Suárez-Orozco and Dundes (1990:18), Gaytan Sánchez (2009:154), and Fridlizius (2009:6–7) argue that ‘rude’ piropos were common in the Middle Ages. Indeed, it is reasonable to think that these traditional practices have always had both refined and slang vocabulary due to linguistic variation across social groups and diachronic change.

Therefore, not only the practice may have changed, but also the perception of the practice. In fact, Achugar (2002) showed generational changes in the interpretation of piropos from flattery speech to insult and harassment. Likewise, Moore (1996), Andrews (1977:57–58), Schreier (2005:75), and Lundgren (2013:7) found a similar tension between the positive and negative interpretations of piropos from both males and females. The positive interpretations relied on the association of piropos with the tradition of gallantry in Hispanic cultures. The negative interpretations relied on derogatory contents and reinforcement of male dominance.

Nowadays, piropos are often seen as sexual harassment as piroperos invade the addressee’s personal space with unsolicited comments about her body, personal appearance, or manners (Rees-Miller, 2011:2674; Gaytan Sánchez, 2009:161). Furthermore, investigation on the perceptions of female addressees has shown that they usually, but not exclusively, relate harassing piropos with construction workers, bus drivers, and other blue-collar workers (Andrews, 1977:51; Calvo Pérez, 2005:41; Malaver and González, 2008:277; Gaytan Sánchez, 2009:113–117; Fridlizius, 2009:13). Lundgren (2013:17) has pointed...
out that this might be an ideological stance that aligns rudeness with low social class. However, no specific studies focusing on piropos from these labour groups has been found.

2 The present study

Using naturalistic data, this paper analyzes the performance of piropos said loudly by male construction workers and addressed to random female pedestrians who happen to cross the nearby area of civil construction sites in Bogotá, Colombia. The selection of this context is motivated by the extreme social inequalities of Bogotá. This practice takes place in a culture where machismo still shapes gender roles favoring masculine dominance in female-male interactions (Viveros Vigoya, 2006:122–126; Castellanos, 2007:156).

The study follows the Interactional Sociolinguistics approach for the interpretation of the participants’ interaction (Gumperz, 2001). Special attention was paid to the participants’ performance (Goffman, 1956:10–46) and the use of discourse strategies, such as linguistic and non-verbal cues, to interpret the interactions (Gumperz, 1982:100–152). We base our work on the supposition that if piropos relate to ideologies of social class and gender, such ideologies must surface in the discursive practice itself, the addressee’s reactions, and the speakers’ opinions. In light of these reflections, the following research questions guided the present study:

1. What are the characteristics of the discursive practice of piropos performed by construction workers in Bogotá, Colombia?
2. What are the speakers’ self-perceptions of their discursive practice of piropo?
3. What do the speakers’ self-perceptions and the addressees’ reactions to piropos inform about underlying ideologies of social class and gender?

2.1 Context of the study: social classes and gendered ideologies of the space

This research was conducted in Bogotá, Colombia. As the capital of the country, Bogotá is the main centre of administrative government, economic power, industrial development, urbanization, and population growth in Colombia. Census data show that, at the time of fieldwork, Bogotá had nearly 7,000,000 inhabitants in an area of 669 square miles (Dane, 2005). Of that population, 60% were born in the city, while 37% were born elsewhere in Colombia.

These immigration trends were inherited from colonial times given the attraction that the city represented for indigenous people, African descendants, and peasants who migrated to the city to look for a better life (Ramírez, 2000:141;
Pereira Fernández, 2011). Initially, the population was organized by racialized groups, so that African descendants, indigenous people, and peasants – all known as *plebeys* – were slaves, servants, and blue-collar workers, while Spanish descendants – known as *notables* – filled official and clerical positions, or owned factories, companies, and stores. *Notables* used to live in exclusive neighbourhoods (e.g. San Jorge), while *plebeys* tended to cluster in popular sectors (e.g. San Victorino) and marginal places (e.g. Fontibón, Bosa, Soacha) (Ramírez, 2000:62, 66, 168). *Notables* were speakers of standard Spanish, a distinguishing sign of the elite, while *plebeys* spoke vernacular varieties of the language (Pereira Fernández, 2011:89, 104).

Gender roles were also subjected to elite ideologies of the space. For the bourgeois society of Bogotá in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the ideal woman had to be married, have children, stay at home, and take care of the family or, otherwise, choose religious seclusion in convents (Ramírez, 2006:35, 48, 62, 122; 2000: 167). Men, on the other hand, were expected to work outside of the home in order to support the family. Females who adjusted to the ideal patterns were considered ‘good women’, while those who dared to venture out into plazas and streets were considered ‘bad women’. Ramírez pointed out that these ‘bad’ women were seen as sexually available for male satisfaction.

Based on this contrast, it is easy to see that the notion of the public space was biased not only by racialized social class but also by gender. *Notable* women – Hispanic descendants – were considered princesses who had to be secluded and protected, while *plebeyas* who circulated in the streets were seen as prostitutes (Ramírez, 2006:37, 42, 175). Consequently, streets in Bogotá (Ramírez, 2000:160–170) and elsewhere (Ryan, 1990:68–76) were represented as dangerous places for women. This may explain the coexistence of paradoxical metaphors underlying *piropos*, which portray women on the one hand as lascivious and sexually available, and on the other as fragile creatures who need care – e.g. princesses, queens, angels, virgins (Achugar, 2001; Suárez-Orozco and Dundes, 1984).

These social and gender hierarchies crashed given the growing social mobility, integration, and the overwhelming need of women to work. However, male dominance and violence against women continued, so that female jobs, behaviours, and dress code were subjected to scrutiny (Ramírez, 2006:119, 124, 181, 186–192). This social organization based on economic resources and geographical space persisted for centuries (Ramírez, 2000:44, 50) and gave rise to the current hierarchical structure of the city, which is discussed in the present paper.
The current social class system is based on territory and social resources. It distinguishes six strata for three social classes as follows: Low class (strata 1 and 2), Middle class (strata 3 and 4), and High class (strata 5 and 6). The administrative organization and the geographical distribution of the city reflect and intensify the extreme social inequalities of its inhabitants. Those in the south tend to belong to the low class and they feed the labour forces, whereas those in the northeast tend to belong to the high class and they are usually business makers, managers, company owners, and employers. Middle-class people, who usually fill clerical positions, are more scattered in the city. This social system impacts daily life, so that workers make long commutes to where offices or industries are located. Unlike the bourgeois society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women have achieved significant rights. However, the early ideals of gender may persist and feed the piropo practice. For instance, the unemployment rate in Bogotá is much higher for women (27.43%) than for men (6.29%) (Dane, 2005). As 89% of the unemployed women are homemakers, these data suggest the persistence of the ideal model of women who take care of the home.

The fieldwork was carried out in Chapinero, one of the twenty administrative zones of the city. Located in the northeast, Chapinero is populated by 123,070 people, mainly from high (57.5%) and middle (36.3%) social classes, as shown in Table 1 (see here below) (Dane, 2005; Mena Lozano, 2008:53). The dominance of the high class in this area is partially explained by colonial heritage, since Spanish landowners and descendants from the Hispanic oligarchy were the earliest colonists who built mansions, held large farms, and launched industries and businesses in the area (Mena Lozano, 2008:16–18).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strata</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>High class</th>
<th>Middle class</th>
<th>Low class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>6,778,691</td>
<td>1.74 %</td>
<td>35.73 %</td>
<td>39.36 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>2.62 %</td>
<td>3.50 %</td>
<td>11.09 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.46 %</td>
<td>5.50 %</td>
<td>4.70 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>35.73 %</td>
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<td>1.50 %</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1. Population patterns from Bogotá and Chapinero (data from 2005 and 2008).
Currently, Chapinero is a central zone for commercial, financial, and industrial business, and educational and recreational services. It has the lowest population growth rate (1.1), the lowest unemployment rate (3.67%), and higher educational rates at the college level and above (50.3%) as compared to those of the city: 1.5, 7.78%, and 16.38%, respectively (Mena Lozano, 2008:19–22, 43–49; Dane, 2005). Moreover, the itinerant population that daily crowds the location is five times larger than the resident population. These statistics, shown in Table 1, depict the extreme inequalities of the city along with a daily sharing of the space.

### 3 Methods

A qualitative method with observational data of public behaviour was used in the current research. Twenty civil construction sites were randomly sampled from about 1,000 civil construction sites on a map of Chapinero (Díaz, 2008). On a daily basis from June 18th through August 15th 2009 (Monday through Saturday), the investigators carried out ethnographic observations of public behaviour in the nearby area of the construction sites selected. This method yielded two consecutive visits to each site and each visit lasted about two hours, comprising a broad range of lunch schedules. For the first visit, the fieldworkers arrived before noon, found a convenient from which to observe, and waited for the emergence of potential _piroperos_ and _adressee_ during lunchtime. The fieldworkers anonymously observed the _piropo_ practice as it naturally occurred and stayed on the site until the flow of people decreased. For the second visit, the fieldworkers made observations for a shorter time and tried to gain access to the site by greeting the construction workers, introducing the study, and then conducting further interviews during the lunch break.

These conditions were propitious for the observation of the _piropo_ practice. The most favourable conditions involved crowds of people passing back and forth during lunchtime through the public spaces (e.g. parks, plazas, and other open areas) where construction workers would have lunch and take breaks. However, observation was not always possible due to noise and/or prominent obstacles in the visible field of some of the sites. Also, there was a reduced flow of people in some of the sites, especially on Saturdays.
The unit of analysis was composed by random *piropos* said clearly and loudly by male construction workers addressing female pedestrians who crossed the nearby areas of the construction sites. The analysis was oriented to identify the relevant aspects of this practice, including the preparatory acts, the performance itself, and the use of discourse strategies. The interpretation of these observations was complemented with qualitative interviews of construction workers and a demographic survey of the speakers. As a case study, the results may help to understand female-male interactions in the Hispanic culture. However, we do not take a moral position regarding the cultural value of *piropos* but emphasize the intrinsic inter-subjectivity of this discursive practice. Contrary to assuming a prescriptive position that condemns the practice as a form of street harassment (Kissling, 1991), we believe that qualitative research will show the pluralistic understanding of *piropos* and the need to renegotiate meaning when necessary.

### 3.1 Research instruments

The observation of public behaviour was the primary instrument of the study. Using a fieldwork diary, the investigators recorded the maximum amount of available information from spontaneous *piropo* practices that took place during lunch breaks. The observation was focused on the participants’ performance, including body language and speech acts. Special attention was paid to the preparatory acts (the means of catching the addressee’s attention) and the verbal or non-verbal response of the addressee (Achugar, 2001:130–131). As construction workers were doing group activities when shouting *piropos*, reactions of pairs were also registered. Other details registered included date, time, and relevant descriptions of the setting.

The analysis of the *piropo* practice was complemented with an open qualitative interview with *piroperos*. As a non-standardized tool to explore the meaning of *piropos* (Bogdan and Taylor, 1987:100), the interview looked for the speakers’ perspectives on the *piropo* practice. The questions targeted the speakers’ understanding of *piropos*, their purpose, their meanings, and some remarkable *piropos* that they could remember (see the interview questions in the Appendix). Interview data helped the interpretation of speakers’ opinions, which were triangulated with the actual practice. The interview was complemented with a short survey that inquired about the demographics of the construction workers.

### 3.2 Corpus and subjects

The corpus for this paper was composed of 87 tokens of *piropos* extracted from their natural context of occurrence, and 40 qualitative interviews with construction workers. Subjects observed were *piropero(s)* (one or more
construction workers who shouted *piropos*, the addressee(s) (one or more females addressed by one or more *piroperos*), and the hearer(s) (construction workers who did not shout *piropos* but heard them and reacted to them). *Piroperos* were construction workers from 15 to 40 years old. They were born in different regions of Colombia, such as the Pacific (10/40), the Caribbean (9/40), and Boyacá (11/40); only a few were from Bogotá (6/40). Most of them (29/40) belonged to the lowest strata (1-2) and had not completed high school. For the interview, we selected an average of two construction workers per construction site, trying to include only *piroperos* who had said some *piropos* during the observation phase and seemed to be more prone to the *piropo* practice. However, some of the interviews were answered in groups, which yielded cooperative responses from both *piroperos* and hearers. The addressees were female pedestrians crossing the nearby areas of the construction sites. Most of the addressees were addressed individually, and a few were addressed in-groups. Some of them received more than one *piropo*. Although the addressees were not interviewed, their physical appearance, manners, and clothing suggested that they belonged to the middle class and held clerical positions: secretaries, receptionists, cashiers, or bank attendants working in the vicinity of the civil construction sites.

### 4 Results

Example (1) illustrates field notes on *piropo* practices performed by construction workers. The notes include address, date, and time in the heading, the description of the scene, the *piropo* itself, and the reaction of the addressees and the hearers.

(1)  
[Civil construction, Cll. 93 # 11 A 11/27, July 10/2009, 2:05 pm]  
[Two females approach the scene]  
[Construction worker stares at females and smiles]  
[Once females are in his path, the construction worker acts as a peddler]  
[Construction worker extends his arm and pretends to be selling poison to the females]  
CW1: ¿*Veneno para el novio?* ‘Would you want some poison for the boyfriend?’  
[Females laugh loudly and talk to each other while walking]  
[Other construction coworkers laugh loudly, celebrate, and comment]  
CW2: *Ese man sí es la cagada.* ‘What a good man, hu!’  
[Celebration continues until females disappear from the scene]

#### 4.1 The discursive practice

Example (1) illustrates the characteristics of *piropos* in the construction-work setting. These events fit the structure described by Achugar (2001:130–131): the
initial conditions (participants’ paths meet by chance), the beginning (the *piropo* itself), the middle (addressee’s reactions), and the end (participants are no longer in the same space/path). However, these *piropos* meet specific criteria related to preparatory acts, the underspecified communicative goals, the participants’ performance, and the discourse strategies for strengthening the content and the form. How these characteristics took place in the field will be described in the following paragraphs. The analysis will reveal that *piropos* are embodied in the interlocutors’ performance, naturalized in daily life, and highly ideologized under blatant forms of *machismo*.

4.1.1 The preparatory acts
Following Goffman’s (1956:13–15) performance theory, the preparatory acts relate to the setting and the projection of personal characteristics on the setting, e.g. posture, facial expressions. Among the construction workers observed, *piropear* is a routinized activity. The practice took place in open public spaces during lunch breaks (2:05 pm in the example), in which there were large numbers of white-collar workers going back and forth from their offices to nearby restaurants. While office workers were mobile and unpredictable, construction workers were stationary, having lunch at a park, resting on the grass, or playing *banquitas* (‘street soccer’) in the areas near to their workplace. Whenever a female office worker crossed the street (two females in the example), construction workers said loudly one or several *piropos*, which were clearly addressed to the female(s). This did not happen when women were in bigger groups or in the company of males, which suggests that *piroperos* might be aware of potential retaliations from males and large groups.

The preparatory acts for *piropos* included (1) sighting the potential addressee, (2) temporal and sudden suspension of the current activity, and (3) calling the attention of the addressee by oral and non-verbal means. In the example, when the females appeared in the visual field of the *piropero*, he (1) sights them as potential addressees and stares at them for a while. During this time, the *piropero* presumably analyzed whether the females were addressable, that is, not in big groups, not in male company, and crossing near his path. Other criteria such as age and physical appearance appeared to be less restrictive.

Next, the *piropero* (2) temporally suspended the ongoing activity by a noticeable silent pause (if speaking), putting down cutlery (if eating), or holding or throwing the ball away (if playing). If construction workers were engaged in group activities such as playing, one leader performed this action. In the example, co-workers were expecting the upcoming *piropo*, which would be performed for the observers (Goffman, 1956:13).
Finally, for (3), calling the addressee’s attention, the speakers started by a short period of intensely eyeing the female up and down. During this time, piroperos presumably appreciated the addressees and meant the piropo. The eyeballing overlapped with some body language: facial gestures, such as the smile in the example, head touching, leaning against a wall, keeping hands into pockets, and sometimes sexually explicit moves or postures. These forms of preparing the act were accompanied with non-speech sounds, such as whistles, hisses, clicks, and snuffles. Overall, the preparatory acts indicate the preparation of ‘the expressive equipment’ (Goffman, 1956:13) for piropos.

4.1.2 Performing the speech acts
Once the preparatory acts have been set, the speaker says one or more piropos. One prominent leader started by saying the first piropo, which is loyally heard by the rest. For a brief time period, the speaker and co-workers observe the addressee’s reaction, which is often followed by gaudy outward displays from the group, including laughter, gestures, and comments. In the first example, they laugh loudly, celebrate, and comment until the addressees disappeared from the scene. If the addressee is still in the audible field, more piropos are said by less ranked co-workers, who do not receive the same degree of attention from their peers. Once celebrations end and the addressees disappear from the visible field, speakers return to their activities until another potential addressee shows. It appears that any speech acts such as greetings and goodbyes may work as piropos as long as the speaker’s performance suggests some erotic interest in the addressee by non-verbal means and meanings implied. In example (1), the question ¿Veneno para el novio? ‘Would you want some poison for the boyfriend?’ implies some virtual interest in the addressee’s availability by offering instruments to remove potential competitors: ‘poison for the boyfriend’.

The following examples illustrate some of the piropos logged in the field. These piropos were short utterances embedded in exclamatory speech acts as in example (2), questions (example 3), direct requests (example 4), and declarative statements (example 5). Sometimes they took the form of greetings (example 6) or goodbyes (example 7) in which the piroperos pretended to open or close an interaction with the addressee.

(2) ¡Qué trasero tan lindo!
‘What a cute ass!’
(3) ¿Todo eso es tuyo, mamita?
‘Is that whole thing yours, honey?’
(4) ¡Espérame que voy por tí, mi amor! [emphatic longer [r]]
‘Wait for me, I am going for you, my love!’
(5) ¡Te luce el pircín!’
‘That piercing looks great on you!’

(6) ¡Hola, ricura! [emphatic longer [r]]
‘Hi, darling!’

(7) ¡Adiós, mamacita! [emphatic longer [s]]
‘Bye, honey!’

These piropos were directly or metaphorically related to the physical appearance of the addressee, her belongings, or behaviours. For instance, the piropero flatters the addressee’s appearance in examples (2), (3), and (5). Likewise, the piropero pretended to be interested in having physical proximity with the addressee in example (4). In order to catch the addressee’s attention, piroperos used endearment terms such as mamita and mamacita ‘honey’ in (3) and (7), mi amor ‘my love’ in (4), and ricura ‘darling’ in (6).

By looking at these examples, piropos appear to be indirect speech acts with underspecified communicative goals, so that all of them are expressive flattering speech regardless of the form of the speech act. Thus, greetings and goodbyes did not open or close conversations, requests were not expected to be satisfied, questions were not to be answered, and no new information was conveyed with statements. Indeed, piroperos displayed an extensive repertoire of piropos firstly to express sexual attraction to the addressee and, secondly, to boast masculinity and strengthen leadership in the group. Therefore, it appears that piropos derive benefits for the speakers (Goffman, 1956:11) at the expense of the addressee.

Given these goals and the transience of piropos, the utterances were formulaic as they reproduced well-established expressions for flattering, such as mamacita (‘honey’), along with greetings or goodbyes in examples (6–7). Therefore, what is highlighted in piropos is not the content or the virtual flattering purpose but the speaker’s performance when pronouncing them skilfully and amusingly, so the words trigger an addressee’s reaction and/or a hilarious result for the hearers. Thus, piropos were not only interpreted as playful behaviour targeting pedestrians, but also chauvinist practices grounded on machismo ideologies. A construction worker alone rarely pronounced these forms of speech, which suggests a gregarious function of the practice.

Furthermore, the addressees’ performance in examples (8–13) suggests that these discursive practices are embodied in the culture and naturalized as part of daily life.

(8) [Young female approaching]
[Construction worker approaches the female and takes his helmet off]
[Female takes a detour and avoids proximity to the male]
CW: ¡Uy!, ¿quién pidió pollo? [emphatic longer [i]]
‘Owaa, who asked for chicken?’
[Female speeds up her pace and goes away]
(9) [Construction workers are having lunch on the grass]
[Female approaches]
[One construction worker stops eating and cleans his mouth quickly and rudely]
CW: ¡Uy, si como camina cocina, me le como hasta el pegao! ‘Owaaa, if you cook as you walk, I would eat even what’s stuck [on the pot]!’
[Female speeds up her pace and goes away]

(10) [Construction workers rest on the grass]
[Female approaches. She is speaking on the phone]
[One construction worker suddenly tries to stand up, but he ends squatting down with hands resting on the grass. He intensely eyes the female up and down]
CW: ¡Buenos días, reina! ‘Good morning, darling!’
[Female is shocked and gets startled as she was speaking on the phone]

(11) [Female in green suit approaches]
[Construction worker intensively stares the female]
CW: ¡La de verde, agáchese y me lo muerde! ‘The one in green, bend down and suck it to me!’
[Female reacts with anger, turns back, and shouts at the construction worker angrily]
F: ¡Pervertido! ‘Dirty man!’

(12) [As a female approaches, a construction worker stares intensely at her]
CW: ¡[tʃao, muñequita!] [epenthetic [t] before [tʃ]]
‘Good bye, doll!’
[The female wrinkles her nose and raises her eyebrow with noticeable anger]
[The female continues her path]

(13) [Female approaches]
[Construction worker takes his helmet off and grooms himself]
CW: Ahi pasa la reina de mi corazón [emphatic longer [r]]
‘There she goes, the queen of my heart’
[Female smiles, makes eye contact with construction worker, and continues her path]

When the addressees realized early enough about the upcoming *piropos*, they made a detour avoiding proximity to construction workers as in example (8). Once exposed to *piropos*, females increased their pace, avoiding long exposure
and eye contact (example 9). Some of them were disturbed, as they were chatting in pairs, talking by phone, or inattentively walking (example 10). Women reacted with anger and irritation, as displayed by verbal responses of displeasure, such as *pervertido* ‘dirty man’ in example (11) and gestures of annoyance or movements that suggested discomfort, such as nose wrinkle or eyebrow rise in example (12). Sometimes, the addressees gave pleasant responses such as smiles, laughter, or gestures that suggested enjoyment, as in examples (13) and (1). Consequently, this evidence suggests that *piropos* were daily practices that the addressees seemed to know how to react to when exposed to them.

Furthermore, the intensity of the celebration of construction workers depended on the addressee’s reaction: the more intense the reaction, the greater the celebration. Thus, *piroperos* not only repeated mechanically idiomatic expressions for flattering, but they tried to enhance the utterance, so they could trigger a reaction from the addressee and reach an effective level of performance (Goffman, 1956:22). Therefore, *piroperos*’ skills are socially assessed not only by the amusement produced by their words but also by the addressee’s reaction. This creates a tension between rude and polite expressions and feeds poetic utterances (i.e. *ludic* language) that strengthen the form or the content.

4.1.3 Discourse strategies to strengthen the content and the form

*Piroperos* displayed discourse strategies to strengthen the content and the form of *piropos* in order to trigger possible reactions from the addressee (pedestrian women) and the hearers (other construction workers). Strategies for strengthening the form gave emphasis to lexical units by consonant and vowel lengthening, producing the audible enhancement of the speech act, as shown in examples (14–19).

(14) *¡Qué cosita tan rica!* [emphatic longer [n], emphatic longer [r]]
‘What a delightful thing!’

(15) *¡Qué pircín tan rico!* [emphatic longer [i]]
‘What a delightful piercing [that hangs from your navel]!’

(16) *¡Estás muy linda!* [emphatic longer diphthongal [w]]
‘You are so cute!’

(17) *Preciosa!* [epenthetic [t] before [s]]
‘Gorgeous’

(18) *Tchao tchicas* [epenthetic [t] before [ts]]
‘Bye, girls’

(19) *¡Qué ojos tan lindos!* [vowel lowering of /i/ to [e]]
‘What cute eyes you have!’
Consonants lengthened were sonorants [r, m, n], as in examples (4), (6), (7), and (14) and sibilants [s], as in example (7). The phonetic properties of sonority of the former and high frequency of the latter (Hayward, 2000:191) may have contributed to making their lexical contexts salient (Gumperz, 1982:107). Facility to pronounce these consonants continuously for relatively long lapses of time probably facilitated their use as means to convey the *piropo* style. The same properties apply to vowel lengthening either in monophthongal (example 15) or diphthongal contexts (example 16). Phonetic cues less frequently used included consonantal epenthesis of [t] before [s], as in example (17), and before [ts], as in example (18). There was also vowel lowering of /i/ to [e] as in example (19). Overall, these phonetic cues made *piropos* more salient and portrayed the street *piropo* style among construction workers.

Morphological and lexical cues to strengthen the content include diminutives, address terms, and endearment terms as displayed in examples (20–22).

(20) ¡*Uy, una miradita!* [diminutive -ita]
‘Owaa, give me a little glance!’

(21) ¡*Mamita, [tú] estás muy rica!* [tuteo] [emphatic longer [m] and [r]]
‘Oh, baby, how delightful you are!’

(22) ¡*Usted* te me cuidas, *reina*! [ustedeo], [epenthetic [t] before [s]],
[emphatic longer [r]]
‘Take care, darling!’

Diminutives were the most frequent resources as a way of conveying affection differing from unmarked meanings, such as *una miradita* ‘a little glance’ in example (20). The diminutives were attached to words that describe the addressee, her belongings, or her actions, so that they intensified the emotional content towards the addressee (Zuluaga Ospina, 1970:30–31). With respect to the address terms, the underlying second person pronoun tú and its verbal agreement in example (21) conveys proximity (Brown and Gilman, 2003). The underlying pronoun usted and its verbal agreement were also used as in example (22). It appears that usted is preferred in fixed expressions conventionalized as *piropos*, for instance ¡*[usted]* Se me cuida...,! in example (22), ¿*todo eso es suyo* [de usted]...? in example (3), and other expressions in examples (9) and (11). Tú, on the other hand, seems to be preferred in spontaneous *piropos*, such as *Mamita, [tú] estás muy rica* in example (21). In any case, the informality of the exchange is maintained.

With respect to lexical resources, there was a prodigious display of endearment terms that denote close affection and proximity, such as *reina* ‘darling’, *nena* ‘baby’, *mi amor* ‘my love’, *mamita* ‘honey’, *mamacita* ‘honey’, *ricura* ‘darling’,
muñequita ‘doll’, princesa ‘princess’, preciosura ‘gorgeous’, as shown in examples (3–4), (6–7), (10), (12), and (21–23). The use of these terms was effective for the purposes of piropos since they alone convey romantic proximity, as they are usually reserved for intimate discourse. Other lexical resources employed to strengthen the content included the use of descriptive adjectives, such as buena ‘hot’, rica ‘delightful’, linda ‘cute’, among others, in examples (2), (14–16), (19), (21), and (24). These adjectives served to describe women, their belongings, and behaviors and eased metaphorical comparisons.

(23) ¡Buenos días, mi princesita! [emphatic longer [s]]
‘Good morning, my dear princess!’
(24) ¡Estás muy buena! [emphatic longer [i]]
‘You are so hot!’

On the other hand, speakers used other strategies to enhance the content of piropos. One of the strategies was the metaphorical comparison of the addressee with food or nonhuman entities as earlier stated by Achugar (2001:131–133). For instance, the addressee is compared to chicken in example (9) and candy in example (25). Adjectives modifying the noun that refers to the addressee convey the addressee as an edible object. By those means, speakers are presumably manipulating the semantic content of piropos beyond repetition of words in order to catch the addressee’s attention. On the other hand, the comparison of the addressee with angels in example (26) gives the impression of refined flirtatious expressions, even though they follow conventionalized scripts for piropos.

(25) ¡Hola, mi bomboncito!
‘Hi, my bon-bon!’
(26) ¡Uy, se rompió el cielo porque se están cayendo los angelitos!
‘Owaaa, heaven has broken open because angels are falling!’

Finally, by combining semantic properties that enhance the content, and phonetic cues that enhance the form, piroperos convey creative poetic utterances, increasing the likelihood of piropos being celebrated. For instance, by selecting the term of endearment mi corazón ‘sweetheart’, the speaker conveys romantic affection in example (27). In addition, he creates a rhythmic effect of the utterance by embedding the speech act in a question that contains two verses whose last syllables end in a sonorant coda [n]. According to Gumperz (1982:110), this is a strategy of tone grouping, in which the speaker deliberately separates prosodic units: ¿Qué horas son // mi corazón? which become prominent for the addressee. Other piropos that also trigger sonority effects contain more
explicit language such as examples (9) and (11). Therefore, all piropos relate to the poetic function of language as part of a verbal game (Achugar, 2001:130). However, only some piropos create sonority effects which, along with body language, define a skilful piropero (Lundgren, 2013:7–10).

(27) ¿Qué horas son // mi corazón?
‘What time is it, sweetheart?’

4.2 The speakers’ perceptions
The piroperos’ perceptions of their own discursive practice show their understanding of the purpose, the content, the language, and the effects of piropos as displayed by their answers to the qualitative interview (see interview questions in the Appendix). When asked about their own notion of the practice, construction workers described piropos as beautiful words, praises or gallant expressions, resources for expressing their admiration to women, or techniques to flirt with women and make them fall in love, as shown in example (28).

(28) SP16: […] los piropos… son palabras para halagar a una mujer.
‘[…] piropos… are words to flatter a woman’

These opinions contrast with findings from the observational data and suggest that the interviewees either provided answers meant as politically appropriate for the interviewers or that they were authentically driving their efforts to attract women with eventual expectations of cooperative responses. However, when asked about the specific purpose of the practice, speakers’ responses differed. Although half of the interviewees (20/40) emphasized the purpose of flattering women, the rest confessed that they do it because it is funny, a way of getting the attention of others, or just a tradition, as displayed in example (29).

(29) SP9: [decir piropos…] es una tradición de los hombres.
‘[shouting piropos] is a male tradition’

Unlike the first trend, these answers suggest that speakers were saying piropos for their self-satisfaction or just following an oral tradition that does not align with the standards of rational communication (Gardiner, 2004:42). The result is important because females appeared represented as casual objects of male entertainment. In most of the answers to the question Do you prefer a particular kind of woman to whom to give a piropo?, most of the interviewees did not specify any kind of preferred addressee: SP29: cualquiera que le llegue ‘whoever happens to receive it [the piropo]’. This suggests that the practice is conceived as
a verbal game that targets any woman who happens to cross the nearby area of the civil construction sites. This is consistent with the findings of Andrews (1977:55) and Lundgren (2013:10–11) regarding the use of piropos for teasing and boasting masculinity at the expense of the addressee.

Regarding the questions about the language used in piropos, the majority (33/40) said that they use sweet words or poetic language, and only a few (7/40) admitted that they use some sexual, sour, or mocking language as shown in example (30).

(30) SP21: *A veces somos vulgares, uno de ruso es vulgar.*

‘Sometimes we are rude, one contractor is rude’

Since the majority of interviewees claimed the intention of using praising speech, these results suggest that their comprehension of piropos is focused on the social interaction rather than the form or the content of piropos alone. In addition, all interviewees indicated that some body language is important when making piropos, for example winking, smiling, or any kind of signal to catch the addressee’s attention. Although piroperos appeared as passive reproducers of oral traditions, these answers suggest that some creativity is deliberately displayed.

Finally, the answers to questions about the addressees’ reactions suggest low awareness of females’ actual responses, as 28/40 construction workers indicated no reaction and only 12/40 declared that women react with anger and annoyance, as depicted in example (31). These results contrast with their answers to a follow-up question about positive reactions from females, as 30/40 of the interviewees indicated having received positive responses, as shown in example (32).

(31) SP5: *En Bogotá le arrean a uno la madre.*

‘In Bogota they [the addressees] damn one’s mother’

(32) SP7: *A veces sí paran bolas, depende del piropo.*

‘Sometimes they [the addressees] do pay attention, it depends on the piropo’

The result is also inconsistent with the few addressees’ reactions that investigators considered positive responses in the observational data, such as laughs and smiles in examples (1) and (14), respectively. Furthermore, 12 of the interviewees indicated actual expectations of cooperative responses from the addressees, such as obtaining personal information (proper names, telephone numbers) or even dating the addressees, as displayed in example (33).

(33) SP21: *Comienzo a declararme, le digo que cuándo vamos a salir y que soy soltero.*
'I start by declaring my love to her, I ask her when we are going to go out, and I tell her that I am single'

As a possible explanation of the contrasts between observational and interviewing data, it is possible that piroperos genuinely meant piropos as authentic flirtatious speech. Therefore, they tried to adorn the utterances linguistically in order to flatter random females, sometimes with expectations of positive responses. However, the interview responses also suggest that the interviewees were aware of the excluding class structure of Bogotá, which increases the social distance between piroperos and addressees and reduces the likelihood of an actual relationship between them. Therefore, piropos surface as an oral tradition to display masculinity for the addressees (random females) and the hearers (male pairs), so that males can fulfill the ‘Don Juan’ metaphor underlying piropos in the Hispanic culture, as stated by Suárez-Orozco and Dundes (1984:120). This public display of masculinity is grounded on a culture in which machismo ideologies prevail (Viveros Vigoya, 2006), so that females appear as objects of erotic amusement and the language is used to trigger the game.

5 Discussion

Findings of this paper give naturalistic evidence of the discursive practice of piropos in a specific Hispanic group: construction workers in Bogotá, Colombia. Interview data show piroperos’ self-perceptions of the practice, which contrasts with the addressees’ reactions observed. The results cannot be generalized beyond this group but they are interpretable from ideologies of social class and gender underlying public behaviours in Hispanic cultures. This section revisits the research questions that guided the study and discusses the theoretical implications of the answers.

The first research question asked about the specific characteristics of the discursive practice of piropos performed by construction workers in Bogotá, Colombia. The results show that construction workers followed the general patterns of the practice already described in previous research: preparing the act, saying the utterance, and ending the event (Andrews, 1977; Achugar, 2001). What appears to be specific for this group is the set of strategies used by construction workers to perform piropos and the intensity with which they perform such a practice. Besides the metaphorical content widely documented (Suárez-Orozco and Dundes, 1984; Achugar, 2001), construction workers also displayed a rich repertoire of discourse strategies to enhance the content and the form of piropos: consonantal and vowel lengthening, consonantal epenthesis, vowel lowering, and rhyme. Thus, no matter how simple and repetitive the speech act is, these
strategies made *piropos* salient for addressees and hearers and facilitated overt reactions from both. This is consistent with Gumperz’ (1982:110) tenets of discourse strategies as evidence of linguistic planning to convey intended meanings. Thus, by inserting the epenthetic [t] in *Tchao tchicas* ‘Bye, girls’, the speaker tells the addressees: ‘I am not just saying “good bye”; I am showing you how witty I am in expressing my attraction to you’. Although some of these characteristics – such as rhyme – have been found elsewhere, the intensity of their use portrayed the *piropo* style among construction workers as they accumulated them in a single *piropo* and repeated them across multiple tokens. Such a style along with the agile use of body language portrayed the construction workers observed as skilful *piroperos*. More research is needed in order to assess exactly how specific these strategies are.

The second research question asked about speakers’ self-perceptions of the *piropo* practice. Crucially, the results show an overall positive perception of *piropos* as *piroperos* used descriptors of beauty, gallantry, and amusement, which align with the stereotypical model of Latin men as depicted by Suárez-Orozco and Dundes in ‘the Don Juan metaphor’ (1984, 1990). A comparison with observational data shows low awareness of hostile language in *piropos* and negative reactions from the addressees, which portrays *piroperos* as both passive reproducers of cultural traditions and active creators of flattering utterances. This result contrasts with Schreier’s (2005) and Malaver and González’ (2008) findings in which some of the male interviewees seem to have more awareness of the derogatory contents of some *piropos* and the negative effects they produce in the addressees. Therefore, subjective responses from distinctive social groups cannot be generalized because each group is located in different axes of the culture and has different access to the circulating ideologies.

The last research question asked what the speaker’s self-perceptions and the addressees’ reactions may inform about underlying ideologies of social class and gender. The results have shown that *piropo* practices reflect and reproduce classed and gendered ideologies anchored to public space. Namely, these ideologies were noticeable in the context examined due to the colonial heritage of Bogotá discussed by Ramírez (2000, 2006) and Pereira Fernández (2011) and the extreme social differences within the city. On the one hand, *piropos* appear as a way for disadvantaged sectors – construction workers – to contest social inequalities through the use of non-normative language, while the addressees ‘keep social distance’ by ignoring such *piropos* and *piroperos* (Goffman, 1956:45). On the other hand, *piropos* appear as a verbal game to display masculinity on the streets, which are ideologically elaborated as hostile spaces for females (Ryan, 1990:68–76; Ramírez, 2000:160–170). Therefore, the tension
between flattering and enjoyment purposes, explicit and inoffensive language, and negative and positive reactions from the addressees suggests the coexistence of *machismo* ideologies, hostile attitudes, and the awareness of social differences. This complements earlier findings by Andrews (1977: 58), Achugar (2002:186–187), and Lindgren (2013:7), whose female interviewees sometimes found *piropos* pleasant and attractive. In light of Goffman’s (1956: 22–23) performance theory, the *piropo* practices reproduce and fulfil expectations of performance in the society where it takes place.

6 Conclusion

Overall, this paper has uncovered the pluralistic understanding of *piropos* as an intersubjective activity embodied in both the speakers and the addressees’ performance. The diversity of representations of *piropos* is consistent with Achugar’s (2001:131–134) analysis of metaphorical representations of male-female interaction, which are collectively arranged and orally transmitted. On the other hand, these multiple perspectives yielded a variety of underspecified purposes other than rational communication (Gardiner, 2004:42). Strategic actions such as courtship, masculinity boasting, and leadership are some of these purposes and seem intrinsic to the practice. In brief, this study has shown that the *piropos* analyzed are speech acts to be performed loudly and publicly. In the context analyzed, *piropos* can be defined as a *verbal game subjected to public scrutiny*. This relates to Gardiner’s (2004:36–37) argument of verbal utterances that collapse multiple viewpoints including reflections of the social location of speakers.

These findings contribute to the studies of *piropos* from an interactional perspective. As a case study, it also contributes to the sociolinguistics of gender with new evidence of male-female interactions tied to ideologies of gender, social class, and the public space. Namely, there is no simple binary explanation of *piropos* through such ideologies, as the practice collapses multiple viewpoints beyond rational communication. Further research of *piropos* in other domains, including upper social classes, female-to-male, and homosexual *piropos*, is needed in order to know whether the discourse strategies described in this paper appear elsewhere and to what degree. A cross-cultural comparison of similar or contrastive communicative practices might be informative about gender interactions across different speech communities. Further qualitative techniques such as discussion groups and life stories might give a deeper interpretation of speakers’ intentions and underlying psychology of the *piropo* practice. As Achugar (2002) and Moore (1996) have done, it is also important to investigate
the addressee’s perceptions in order to understand better the ways in which participants in different roles make sense of the píropo practice and, therefore, how they negotiate their meanings.

Appendix: Interview guiding questions

**First group**
1. Could you explain to us what a píropo is for you?
2. Why do you give a píropo to a woman?
   For example: flattering, calling attention, tradition, to have fun.
3. Do you prefer any kind of woman to whom to give a píropo? For example: young, old, blond, brown, tall, short, chunky, etc.
4. Do you just say a píropo spontaneously or do you have to mind it deeply?
5. What kind of language do you often use when giving píropos? For example: sour, sweet, poetic, funny, mocking, sexual.

**Second group**
6. Do you use any kind of gestures, movements, postures, any particular behavior when saying píropos? Which ones?
7. What have you achieved when saying píropos? Are they effective for your purposes?
8. Have you ever experienced any kind of violent response from women due to a píropo you gave her? Tell us about that.
9. Have you ever received any positive responses from women? What have you done next?

**Third group**
10. Which has been your best píropo ever? Tell us about that. How was that? Why was it the best?
11. Have you ever been addressed with a female’s píropo? How was that? How did you feel?
12. In general, how do you feel when giving a píropo? For instance: happy, important, satisfied, worry, sad.
13. Tell us some píropos you remember.

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