Toward a multimodal pragmatics analysis of ambulant vending on a Buenos Aires trainline

Journal Item

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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1. Introduction

This article examines the communicative practices of ambulant vendors (AVs) working on a Buenos Aires trainline and how they respond to some of the complexities of the structural conditions of making a living on the move. Ambulant vending (AV) comprises the sale of products or services exchanged for cash with customers in any public space without sales support (Rodríguez Romero 2014: 26). It represents one of the more significant manifestations of the informal economy (Roever and Skinner 2016) which in Argentina constitutes up to 50% of country’s GDP (Wiego 2020).

Contrary to sales encounters in formal economy settings where people enter shops to buy, browse, or passers-by walk past market stands and, by so doing, signal some interest (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer 2015), passengers do not board trains to procure products but do so as means of transport. They are under no obligation to pay attention to vendors as they pitch products. Indeed, the video data on which this paper is based show that passengers tend to shun interpersonal encounters (Goffman 1963) with vendors by avoiding eye contact with them or looking at the products.

This study evidences the embodied precarity of a group of AVs on one of Buenos Aires’ trainlines in a context where vending, though not illegal, is not officially permitted (Fernández Álvarez 2019). Over a 20-day period, before the first wave of Covid-19 was officially confirmed in Argentina, four AVs video-recorded their working practices on the trainline. This first-person perspective enabled the recording of a unique data set that
considers for the first time the role of multimodality in the achievement of AVs’ sales pitches, and their considerable adroitness in navigating the inadequate dimensions in which they strive to maintain their sustenance.

The trainline the authors focus on is akin to a metropolitan overground train. It does not have a trolley service or buffet car where products are sold or consumed, and a video-camera could be set up. AVs walk along the train coaches offering their products. Movement along the coaches is an essential part of their work which previous studies have not examined.

The paper concentrates on the sales pitch. It demonstrates how AVs manoeuvre the conditions they inhabit to sustain their livelihood in the light of their constrained agency (Perelman 2013) relative to the choice of products they sell, and the physical space where they are sold. The products are unsolicited and sold in a moving space requiring spatial, visual and oral-auditory management. This involves AVs’ movement along the train coaches, time- and self-management around train stops and passenger flows, including boarding and alighting, as well as coordinating the co-working space with other AVs. These factors need to be carefully orchestrated to try to establish a connection with passengers with a view to turning them into prospective customers and achieving sales.

In the shared public space of the train where passengers have a right to enjoy relatively undisturbed journeys, AVs need to draw attention to themselves and create a demand for products of potentially little or no immediately apparent appeal to passengers, while manipulating them in a moving space within a relatively short timeframe (in between stations).

The analysis goes beyond the discursive elements of the sales pitch that have been given primacy in linguistics studies of AV by adopting a multimodal pragmatics approach (cf. O’Halloran et al 2014). It incorporates the visible bodily actions (Kendon 2004) captured in
the AV’s own video-recordings, which occur simultaneously with or are supplementary to actions carried out verbally, considering the contingencies surrounding the products and physical space where they are sold, salient prosodic features of the sales pitch, as well as contextual factors, such as the relational asymmetries between AVs and passengers regarding their legitimacy in this public space, their respective goals, and the sociocultural context where AV occurs. The analysis provides an embodied description of how some of the structural dimensions AVs inhabit (e.g., having an undefined workplace, relying on locally available products which may prove hard to sell, the labour intensity of AV and its physical demands), are continually re-produced in the sales pitch (e.g., having to carry their merchandise with them and store it in an unobstructive place on trains) and the practices through which they are re-enacted (e.g., accounting for their presence on trains, demonstrating audibly and visibly the product authenticity).

The article foregrounds AVs’ professionalism, an important aspect of their competency which has been overlooked in the literature on deficient conditions (UN Sustainable Development Goal 8) of workers of the popular economy and extends pragmatic research to real-time sale encounters in a context of deep-seated inequality.

In the next section, we provide a review of research on ambulant vending with special attention to Buenos Aires. This is followed by a description of the data and methods deployed (3.) and its analysis (4.) before the conclusions of the study are presented.

2. Research on ambulant vending in Buenos Aires

AV has primarily received attention from social scientists, especially those interested in various aspects of the informal economies of the Global South (e.g., Bhowmik 2012). Prominent examples include, but are not limited to, research on the working lives of street
vendors in the cities of Mumbai (Saha 2011), Bogotá and Medellín (Vargas and Urinboyev 2015; Blandón 2017), market vendors in Cochabamba (Goldstein 2016) as well as disputes about the use of public space in Rio de Janeiro and São Paolo (Hirata 2015; Pires 2020) and during Covid-19 (Belcic 2022). Overall, these studies reveal the unequal conditions and struggles that AVs face in different locales where informal economic activity plays an important role.

Perelman's anthropological research (2013; 2014; 2016) on how AVs work on the Buenos Aires underground is particularly relevant. The author discusses how AVs create and maintain relationships and reciprocal obligations among themselves beyond the economic sphere to develop their economic activity and assign co-workers on work circuits. Also relevant are the anthropological studies conducted by (Fernández Álvarez 2016; Fernández-Álvarez 2018; 2019) on the dynamics of AVs’ syndicate organization, workers’ mobilization and demands on the trainline examined here.

In terms of linguistic studies, Ergueta, Martínez and Serpa (2002) and Leisch and Murata Missagh (2019) examined the discourse of AVs’ sales pitches in the Argentinian capital’s transport system (buses, underground and trains). Based on the authors’ mobile phone audio-recordings and observations during transport journeys, Ergueta et al (2002) conceptualised the sales pitch as performance (Bauman 2002) and approached its analysis by recurring to contextualisation cues (Gumperz 1982) and Goffman's (1967) notion of positioning. In so doing, they noted some of the performance differences between AVs’ discourse and that of beggars who often occupy the same physical space.

Similarly, Leisch and Murata Missagh (2019) provided a discursive study of “street vending discourse” as a genre on a Buenos Aires underground line and distinguished it from “begging discourse”. While Ergueta et al (2002) integrated an account of the spatial configuration of
the sales pitch informed by social semiosis (via Bauman 2002), including impressionistic prosodic elements, Leisch and Murata Missagh (2019) principally focused on the presence, absence, and distribution of discursive elements of the genre of street vending vs. begging. Movement, however, is an integral part of AV which prior research has not fully considered, especially in relation to its coordination with speech in the accomplishment of the sales pitch.

Research in ethnomethodological conversation analysis (EMCA) has examined movement in sales encounters within the formal economy, especially gaze, head and gestures in customers’ embodied actions, and the manipulation of products in sequences of talk (e.g., Svinhufvud 2018; Moody 2022) where participants were mainly stationary. The findings demonstrate the mutually constitutive and sequential relations between visible bodily actions and talk (e.g., Haddington, Mondada, and Nevile 2013). They highlight, among others, the role of gaze and eye contact as a preliminary to verbal contact with prospective customers (see, also, Clark and Pinch 1995; Llewellyn and Hindmarsh 2010).

Of relevance to the data examined here are Mondada's (2014) and Broth and Mondada's (2013) studies on guided walks. Although the authors did not focus on a sales encounter setting, they show how walking and talking reflexively build one another – with one modality adjusting and achieving the order of the other- Smith (2021), and how walking away achieves closings in guided walks.

The current study differs from discourse pragmatics (see Félix-Brasdefer and Márquez Reiter 2021 for an overview) and EMCA research on sales encounters in several ways. It concentrates on a setting where selling is not officially permitted or necessarily expected despite constituting a ubiquitous practice. AVs are not “posted” servers (Merritt 1976), nor are passengers necessarily guaranteed customers. The projects of the AVs and passengers are different. While AVs attempt to make a living by selling products they have access to on a
given day on trains, passengers use the trains as a means of transportation. Furthermore, unlike multimodal EMCA studies of sales encounters in semi-mobile settings, such as open markets where passers-by browse products in stalls and are propelled into buying (e.g., Clark and Pinch 1995; Mondada 2022), or officially permitted vendors approach passers-by (Llewellyn and Burrow 2008) AVs are the mobile party. They stand and move along train coaches as they attempt to bring instantaneous product delivery to passengers to the comfort of their seats.

This article outlines the enactment of the sales pitch as synergistically constituted by the interaction of verbal and bodily contributions and how it responds to the unequal conditions AVs inhabit. The data examined capture the visual field of AVs at chest level: what they see in front of them, including the products they sell, passengers, other vendors, their hands and arms movement, physical orientation, positioning and movement on the train (walking, stopping, torquing, turning around).

3. Data and methods

The study was originally conceived as participatory ethnographic research (e.g., Bodó et al. 2022) with both researchers and participants actively involved in the research and knowledge production process. Covid-19 prevented travelling to Buenos Aires. As a result, four AVs from a workers’ cooperative participated by recording their working practices on a trainline over 20 days in early 2021iii by placing their mobile phones in a transparent pouch hanging from a chest belt (see Table 1 below where the products offered by each AV and the number of videos recorded by them is shown). They decided when to start and to stop videorecording as they engaged in their daily work on trains and the data they shared.
The video data comprise a total of 28 hours (263 videos). It captures everything that can be seen within the mobile phone field in the direction the vendor is facing, especially the use of their arms, hands, and body movement (walking, torquing, stopping) when manipulating and showing products to sell. Hence, the AVs’ heads, head movement and gaze are not fully visible in the data unless when captured by another vendor’s camera. In the light of this and that the products were met with little interest, the analysis focuses on the details that are hearable and visible as part of the achievement of the sales pitch.

The analysis integrates concepts and disciplinary concerns associated with language in use and action co-ordination (Clift and Haugh 2021) to reach an understanding of the sales pitch during the AVs’ work rounds, observe the individual and collective activity of AV, comprehend sales strategies, and document some of the challenges they encounter in their daily work activities as they transpire in the communicative practices reported. It adopts a multimodal pragmatics perspective that considers how the visible bodily actions (Kendon 2004) that are evident in the videos interact with verbal actions in the enactment of the sales pitch. This allows us to account for the communicative tools AVs employ to create, sustain, and satisfy the (supposed) demand for the products being sold, which does not only hinge on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ambulant Vendors (AVs)</th>
<th>Products</th>
<th>Videos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AV1L (man)</td>
<td>Headphones, harnesses, phone charges.</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AV2N (man)</td>
<td>water balloons, alfajores, chewing gum and sparklers.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AV3A (man)</td>
<td>Cold drinks ( water, Coke, etc.).</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AV4R (woman)</td>
<td>notepad, pen and LED lights.</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>263</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Identifies the four AVs (anonymised) who collected the data by recording their own working practices on a train line over 20-day period and the type of products they offered to passengers during those days. It also includes the number of videos recorded per participant.*
speech. In parallel, context-based interpretations of language in use (verbal and non-verbal) are offered by examining the sales strategies deployed in the pitch according to the actions they serve to achieve and the sociocultural factors they orient to.

The data were transcribed following the Jefferson's transcription system (2004). Relevant visible bodily actions were described in double parenthesis, i.e., (( )), with stills aligned to their anchor points (#) in the transcript. The transcription and annotation of bodily practices was done using ELAN software, while prosodic analyses used Praat software.

263 videos were analysed (see Table 1 above). The common stages which constitute the sales pitch (the opening, middle and closing) were identified and their components scrutinized according to their multimodal configuration across vendors and products. This was done by considering AVs’ deployment of lexico-grammatical features, bodily behaviours, and salient prosodic resources as part of the composition of the actions through which the sales pitch is achieved. The simultaneity and/or complementary of multimodal resources and how they evolve in the temporal development of the pitch was also key to delimiting the stages and components of the sales pitch and the recognisability of this social activity within the physical and social ecology of the train.

4. The train as a pop-up mobile store on a Buenos Aires trainline

In the setting examined, passengers and AVs are co-present in a shared public space. As contributors to the Argentinian economy, AVs who work on this trainline use the train as their workplace. This requires making themselves visible and audible relative to others occupying the same space. AVs attempt to bring unsolicited products to passengers who are under no obligation to show an interest in them or acknowledge their presence on trains. In public space, people arrange their co-presence through mutually monitoring each other,
anticipating others’ trajectories, and organising their own conduct accordingly (Goffman 1963, 1971). For AVs, this entails monitoring and responding to passengers’ visible bodily practices, such as gaze, head movements, and language, as indices of interest rather than mere displays of civil (in)attention (Goffman 1963). One of the biggest challenges that AVs face is switching passengers’ interactions with them from unfocused to focused (Goffman 1961) and turning them into prospects. The corpus attests to this difficulty by noting how passengers tend not to look at the products or AVs and the limited sales achieved in a single day of work. Moreover, AVs share this public space with other train dwellers, such as other vendors. The data show how the coach space is collaboratively managed, for instance, by respecting co-worker space (e.g., waiting for other AVs to finish their pitch before starting their own, see Excerpt 11.2).

Public space both enables and restricts the kinds of social interactions that can occur therein; that is, space shapes and is shaped by the forms of sociality that are possible (Simmel 2011). In simple terms, social interactions are intimately related to space insofar as space is supported by social relations but is also producing and produced by them (e.g., Zieleniec 2007). Space is thus political (Lefebvre 2014); it is a “non-neutral” (even agentive) zone in which specific ordered identities, actions and meanings can be generated (Blommaert 2013:15). This is observed by AVs’ bodily orientation to passengers’ right of way and in their efforts to convert passengers into prospects.

Besides coordinating the space with others, both the movement of the train and the materiality of the product being sold on a given day, such as its size, need to be carefully managed to allow for easy handling and visibility, including its demonstration. The products offered range from branded products – typically beverages and confectionery - to generic unbranded items such as the ones mainly examined here – bulb lamps and headphones. In trying to create a demand for them, AVs address potential issues in product sellability,
including its authenticity, quality, functionality and price. Products are generally offered at a lower selling price than at retailers and are presented as unique opportunities.

The analysis reveals how the sales pitch is influenced by the space on the train and the type of product that AVs bring on a given workday. The train’s intermittent physical movement between stations and passenger flows, coupled with AVs’ limited socioeconomic mobility obliges them to travel on trains to sell products which are largely available elsewhere, including at train station kiosks.

AVs respond to the lack of a delimited workplace by embodying elements of a store: they manage the space of the coach to reach and store their merchandise. Where necessary, they use parts of their body as a “rack” and themselves as a “window display” to describe and demonstrate the product as they construct their sales pitch in a time-sensitive way, subject to the timeframe of the train journey and typically between stops.

We next outline the stages and components of the sales pitch (4.1). This is followed by an analysis of how multimodal resources are orchestrated in the enactment of the sales pitch (4.2) and the way in which one vendor distributes them to deal with a product challenge (5).

4.1 The AVs’ sales pitch

Once on the train platform, AVs’ working days are made up of identifiable moments which the authors analyse as recurrent stages: getting on the train, standing on one side of a coach, delivering their sales pitch, walking along the coach offering and selling their products, repeating the process in every coach, getting off the train, and recycling the whole process several times a day.
AVs and passengers display different roles and goals as soon as they get on the train. AVs wait for passengers to board first, move along the coach and physically position themselves, taking a seat or standing. They thus orient from that moment to passengers’ right of way, and to their ensuing activity as not necessarily commensurate with the kind of activities that are officially sanctioned within this space.

AVs attempt to make their presence known at the earliest available opportunity: they stand in a central area of the coach in a proximal position that respects the enclosed passenger area. Initially, they stand in a clearing in the coach between blocks of seats and tend to offer their product to the first half of the coach repeating the process to the second half, and subsequently move to the next coach repeating the same sequence. In this way, they reach a wider audience and maximise potential attention (Error! Reference source not found. below).

![Figure 1. Spatial configuration of the coach and AV activity. AVs stand in the clearing of the coach for the central part of the sales pitch. The sets of arrows show their typical rounds during the opening of the sales space, either in circuits going up and down the coach (dotted line) during the extended sales pitch or as a single pass through the coach (straight arrow) when offering drinks or other edible products.](image)

The analysis revealed three main stages to the AVs’ working practices on trains. Body motion, as kinetic component, was key to defining the major stages of the pitch.

The pre-sales stage which entails accessing the trains from the platform while preparing the merchandise to be carried and waiting for passengers to board first.
The opening of the *sales pitch* is done from stationary position. It involves AVs’ preparation of the ‘shop floor’ by physical positioning themselves in the coach clearing and uttering a routinised access ritual (Basso and Senft 2009) which serves to account for their presence and draw (further) attention to themselves. The middle of the sales pitch is also performed from a stationary position (cf. Ergueta, Martínez, and Serpa 2002). It comprises the product presentation (naming, qualifying the product according to its affordances, needs, user beneficiaries), price, offer and quality control (demonstrating it and inviting to (re) test). The pitches are characterised by having an extended middle where the AV is in motion. While moving along the coaches AVs engage in sales rounds with cycles of repetitions of product details. In the case of sales, this is followed by a verbalised closing. Otherwise, the closing is bodily marked (Broth and Mondada 2013) by turning around and reorganising the merchandise before exiting the train as part of the *post sales stage*. This is illustrated in Figure 2, below.

**Figure 2**: Sales stages, structure and components. The highlighted sections of the sales pitch are the focus of this study. It includes the opening, middle and extension of the sales pitch. During the opening and middle of the sales pitch AVs introduce themselves and the product in a stationary position. Then, the extension of the sales pitch represents the opening of the sales space when AVs walk along the corridor and passengers can buy their products from their seats.
4.2 Orchestrating resources in the enactment of the sales pitch

The type of sales pitches examined here are akin to a “spiel” (Bauman 2002) for they constitute extended chunks of talk where AVs introduce and describe a product and an offer in smaller incremental chunks of information. AVs and passengers orient to this as a full “big package” (Sacks 1992, II:345) by, for instance, not interrupting or requesting the products at this stage, irrespective of any prosodic finality markers or silence after each incremental part of the pitch.

*From a stationary point to a state of motion (walking)*

The threshold between an initial pre-sales stage and the sales pitch proper is marked by the physical positioning and organisation of the products in a stationary point (not walking) in the clearing of the coach. The sales pitch starts with the initiation of vocal activity that occupies the auditory space of the coach with greater loudness and resonance (Ergueta, Martínez, and Serpa 2002), and the visual space is managed with extended use of the arms from chest height and above, as captured in Ex.11.3, Images 13G and 13I) (McNeill 1992). There is increased use of upper-body movement especially both arms and hands for demonstration and pointing and a decrease of lower-body movement (legs). The middle is marked by the beginning of motion (walking) forward in the coach towards the corridor. It is accompanied by the body rotation to both sides and (semi)extended arms to hold and show the products, making up a moving “window display”, and offering the products to the passengers sitting on both sides (Figure 3). Conversely, the extension of the middle (summarised upshot) is done with an increase of lower-body movement and extension of the limbs depending on the product.
This shift from a stationary (not-walking) point in the coach (middle of the sales pitch, see image B in Figures 2 and 3 above) to a state of motion, as AVs walk along the corridor (extension of the middle, see image C and Figure 2), marks the availability of the products for passengers to see closely, inspect, and purchase. The relevance of walking to get closer to the passengers during the summarised upshot (extension of the middle) of the sales pitch is created by walking slowly and moving the body sideward towards the passengers. AVs walk along the coach looking from side to side, raising and extending their arms to offer the product. These practices are accompanied by continuation of the vocal activity, repeating chunks of information in previous stages within the sales encounter.
Selling the coach space into a shop floor

AVs physically carry the products with them. They position themselves in the clearing, setting up a “window display” to attend to the contingencies of managing a product while standing on a moving train and manipulating it so that it can be seen by the passengers.

The opening of the sales pitch is initiated by adopting an anchored position in the coach with limited or no movement of the feet or displacement. Mobile activity is concentrated around the movement of the arms and hands, which contributes to enhancing the AVs’ visual and auditory presence and maximises their chances of converting passengers’ unfocused to focused attention. To this end, they hold the products at chest-line level and above.

Once physically positioned, and with the product ready to be displayed, AVs broker access to the visual and auditory coach space by means of a routinised access ritual (Basso and Senft 2009) which often comprises the expression of multiple greeting items (cf. Leisch and Murata Missagh 2019). With this, they account for their (unsolicited) presence and draw attention to themselves before introducing the product. The greetings and vocatives differ in familiarity and formality and are idiosyncratic to each AV, as Excerpt 1 below show (see also Excerpt 11.2, section 6):

Excerpt 1. AV1L_1A

((straightens a bunch of headphones with his right-hand while holding them with his left hand raised))

1 AV1L hola:: amigo::s::? (0.5)
   hello friends

The sales pitch is prosodically characterised by features that make AV recognisable as a specific type of social activity. The prosodic features that characterise the rhythmic and incremental presentation of information in the sales pitch give a particular proclamatory quality to it and contribute to the delimitation of its core components. AVs make use of
higher overall volume and a higher pitch range while interacting with customers, and a voice quality that is hearably tenser than their modal voice, which is also an effect of the vocal effort of voice projection. Intonation contours during the sales pitch are quite often stylised, made of long high- and low-level contours that resemble those found when “calling out” (Ladd Jr 1978) and which contribute to its hearability.

The following practices are characteristic of the middle of the sales pitch. Each incremental contribution to the pitch is prosodically packaged in ways consistent with paratones (Yule 1980). The incremental, list-like nature of these pitches is also organised through matching pitch contours for each incremental contribution. This perception of a slow-paced, clearly articulated speech is also supported by forms of hyperarticulation, for example, by considerable segmental lengthening at phrase boundaries on accented, but especially, also final unaccented syllables (e.g., in Excerpt 1, line 1, the length of the final [o] and [s] on the final unstressed syllable of “ami:go::s::”). Figure 4 shows the organisation of different components in the sales pitch of one vendor (AV1L) that are produced in a series with matching contours, finishing in segmental lengthening, and separated by pitch resets and silence.

**Figure 4.** Acoustic visualisation (waveform, spectrogram, f0 and intensity trace) of incremental contributions in the sales pitch of AV1L, each separated by silence and with an initial pitch reset on the first syllable, and with matching intonation contours. [Translated text: “Hello, friends” (0.4) “I’m going to offer in this opportunity” (0.2) “You’re going to get a pair of headphones” (0.4)]. The last two segments in “amigos” are highlighted for appreciation of length.
Product presentation and demonstration

Once the AVs have established their presence visually and auditorily, they introduce the product and the offer incrementally in the form of lists. Typically, the first action is the announcement of the imminent presentation of a product/offer. Instead of naming the product straightaway, the AVs create momentum by displaying it visually, and then they verbally build up interest by foregrounding a particular quality of the product through positive assessment terms (e.g., Excerpt 2, line 3) until it is named and topicalised (e.g., Excerpt 3, line 5). Hence, showing how visibly bodily actions (lifting the product) can precede, supplement and augment similar verbal actions:

Excerpt 2. AV2N_6A

(Positions himself in the clearing and takes two packets out of the bag)

1 AV1N: # #les #:traigo señoreh. = >la alegría. = la #diver:sión<
I bring to you, Sirs, the joy, the fun

Img. #3A #3B #3C #3D

2 = para los más <chico del hogar? #(1.1)
for the little ones at home.

Img. #3E

3 la <CLASSICA: > = bombita de agua. = bombycha. = señores. =
the classic water balloon, ‘bombucha’, Sirs,

Img. #3F #3G

4 = el original. = e:h? (3.2)
(the) original, huh?

#3A: AV positions himself
#3B & #3C: gets packets out of the bag
#3D: straightens packet
#3E: straightens packet
#3F: lifts packet
#3G: shows packet
Together with the naming of the product, where appropriate, the brand is mentioned. AVs thus appeal to the reputation of the product they are selling, foregrounding its authenticity (“the original”, Excerpt 2, line 4) or its recognisability (“well-known for its TV commercial”, Excerpt 3, line 8). They also assess the product, employing intensified forms of positive assessments, from augmentatives (“super delicious”, Excerpt 3, line 7) to intensified positive adjectival phrases (“a true delicacy”, Excerpt 3 line 3) which convey a projected positive customer experience.

Another component of the product presentation stage involves the introduction of the personal affordances of the product in the form of projected uses and target
users/beneficiaries. As seen in Excerpt 2 above, the water balloons are for the “youngest ones at home” and the *alfajores* “to enjoy during the journey”, hence making relevant cultural practices and the normativity associated with the product. Other AVs mention possible locations where the products can be placed or kept, as shown in Excerpt 4, below (“for your purse or bag”, line 48), and their practical affordances (“to do your calculations”, line 55).

The product presentation, part of the middle of the sales pitch, displays the AVs’ knowledge of the product and entails product placement. It creates a product need by orienting to their knowledge of the passenger collective, their possible routines and interests. The AVs thus adapt their pitch to the relevance of immediate or personal use of the product for passengers. While edible products can be consumed on the spot, other products may be more difficult to place and are treated as potential gifts or as useful items to have at hand (Excerpt 4, lines 60-62).

Excerpt 4. AV4R_12C

48 AV4R:  
49 para la cartera = para el bolso =
for the purse for the bag
50 =tengan ustedes muy buenos dias (0.2)
you all have a nice day
51 presente y entrego como siempre
I present and deliver as usual
52 el anotador con la lapicera
the notepad with the pen
53 (0.2)
(lines 53-54 omitted)
55 para las cuentas (. ) para llevarle a los chicos
For your calculations, to take to the kids
56 y tenerloh entretenedoh (0.2)
And keep them entertained
(lines 57-59 omitted)
58 también es cierto( . ) que al momento de querer anotar algo
It’s also true that in those moments you want to take
59 something down
60 (. ) no encontramos ninguna de las doh cosah (.)
we can’t find either of them
61 ni papel ni lapicera
neither paper nor pen
In addition to mentioning the product’s uses and beneficiaries, the AVs devote a part of their pitch to listing the technical affordances of the product, where relevant. The specifications, such as their compatibility, flavour, colour, or weight, are presented in ways that display product knowledge and audience orientation (i.e., ensuring these are understandable to the passengers). Technical or complex vocabulary is first mentioned and then reformulated as an appositional to offer a lay version of the product’s general value, as show in Excerpt 5 (see also Excerpt 11.6, line 31)

Excerpt 5. AV1L_1a

1. AV1L:    la ficha es universal. (0.3)  
   the plug is universal
2. sirve para cualquier marca.  
   It works with all brands

As with many parentheticals (Dehé 2009), the reformulations are produced with matching intonation contours to those of their referents (Figure 5):

![Figure 5](image-url)  

**Figure 5.** Acoustic visualisation (f0 and intensity trace) showing the intonational configuration of the appositional reformulation (Excerpt 8, lines 1-2).

Normally, the description of the products’ technical features tends to be accompanied with visible bodily demonstrations including deictic gestures, in the form of a composite utterance (Enfield 2009) where the verbal and gestural are presented together as one. In Excerpt 6, Images 9A-D, AV1L’s description of the product’s affordances is simultaneously
accomplished across modalities allowing thus for its concurrent description and
demonstration.

Excerpt 6: AV1L_1

4 AV1L: hoy van a llevar auriculares, Today you are going to take (with you) headphones
5 universales, = estereofónicos, (0.5) (they are) universal = stereophonic (sound)
6 con: manos libres, (0.5) hands free
7 para: calculares. = audios. = tablet. (0.5) for mobile phones, audios, tablets
8 : computa: do: ras:,(1.6) computers
   ((raises left arm holding the bunch of headphones and
extends one of them with right hand))
9 para consolas de juego. =
   for (video) game consoles
   ((points at in-line volume control and uses the
controls with his right hand))
10 =. tienen micrófono, = tienen
   (They) have (a) microphone (they) have
   Img. #9A
11 control.: (.) de volumen en el cable, (0.2)
   control volume control in the cable
   Img. #9B
12 de # largo miden un metro veinte: (0.3)
   (they are) one metre twenty long
   Img. #9C
13 viene con # ficha universal: l. (.)
   (it) comes with (a) universal plug
   Img. #9D

#9A: touches and holds volume control  #9B: holds volume control and shows cable  #9C: stretches the cable  #9D: points at the plug
Product demonstration and quality control

Another way in which AVs reveal their professionalism and build their legitimacy during their pitch is by publicly demonstrating that the items on sale are in perfect order and by inviting passengers to inspect them and ascertain their quality (e.g., Excerpt 7 below). By providing openness and an opportunity for inspection and testing (see Mondada 2022), AVs build trust in what could otherwise be seen as a fleeting encounter with no guarantees for the customer. They also specify the no-purchase-obligation commitment of handling the product for inspection (Excerpt 8, line 9), therefore, providing an opportunity to allure unsure prospects to take the plunge. Technical descriptions and product demonstrations indicate what AVs understand is expected in terms of service and how they rise to this challenge despite having no sales support.

Excerpt 7. AV4R_16b

22 AV4R:  para llevarlo con total confianza(.)
to acquire them in complete confidence
23 tenemos para probarla (.)
we have means to test them
24 igualmente están probadas y revisadas
in any case they have been tested and checked

Excerpt 8. AV1L_1a

7 AV1L:  si quieres verlo mejor.
if you want to see it better
8 o lo quieres probar, = con tu celular: r? =
or you want to test it with your own mobile
9 sin compromiso.
no commitment/no strings attached

Price and offer

AVs typically end their pitch with a description of the price and the offer, which they verbally design as a good value for money, as an offer that cannot be found elsewhere and is exclusive to the day or week (e.g., Excerpt 9, line 16 and Excerpt 10, line 8 below). Some
vendors offer bulk buys, while others a single product at a reduced price. The offer is contrasted to the opportunities that may be found at retailers (e.g., Excerpt 9, line 14, Excerpt 10, lines 6-8). Its temporary nature is highlighted with adverbs and adjectives that present the offer as exceptional, exclusive, and timely, as an opportunity to be grasped from the comfort of the passengers’ seats during the temporality of the sales encounter. Normally, the offer and the price tend to be grammatically topicalised via processes of direct object fronting (e.g., Excerpt 9, lines 17-18 and Excerpt 10, line 10).

Excerpt 9. AV2N_5D

14 AV2N: este alfajor se abona en kioscos (.)
   this wagon wheel costs in kiosks
15 cuarenta y cinco cincuenta pesos la unidad: (0.8)
   forty-five, fifty pesos per unit
16 hoy le voy hacer entrega = señores =
   today I will deliver it to you, Sirs
17 la oferta se van a llevar (0.5)
   the offer, you’ll take it
18 tres unidades cien pesos les cobro
   Three units, a hundred pesos I charge you

Excerpt 10. AV2N_6A

6 AV2N: este paquete, = se abona en kioscos,
   This package costs in kiosks
7 ciento ochenta = doscientos pesos. (2.2)
   one hundred eighty, two hundred pesos.
8 los trae la oferta = señores.
   I bring an offer to you, Sirs.
9 = el paquete contiene = cien unidades, (0.9)
   The package contains one hundred units.
10 ;cien pesos. = les cobro, (0.8)
   One hundred pesos, (I) charge (you).

So far, it has been shown how body motion- from a stationary (not walking) point to a state in motion- marks the major stages of the sales pitch (pre-sales stage, middle and extended sales pitch, and post-sales), and how its components are constituted by the interdependent articulation of verbal and visible actions. It has been observed how visible actions can advance product topicalisation and complement its verbal presentation (e.g., Excerpts 2 and
3), and that visible actions (touching, holding and showing) are simultaneously accompanied by similar verbal actions (description of affordances) and presented as one (Excerpt 6).

The coordination of multimodal resources displays AVs’ abilities and experience in managing the deficient conditions of working on trains (e.g., passengers’ visual field during the middle of the pitch, manipulating products on a moving train). Next, the paper concentrates on one full sales pitch from one of the AVs to further illustrate the assemblages of multimodal practices to present the product, resolve technical problems in situ, and offer a competitive price according to the stages of pitch described.

5. The distribution of multimodal resources to deal with product challenges: the case of LED lamps

AV4R is of particular interest because she faces multiple challenges in relation to product versatility, in addition to those regularly posed by the conditions of informal work on trains. The focus in this section is on how AV4R uses different multimodal resources to gain passengers’ attention, generate interest and deal with product challenges: how different modes are simultaneously coordinated or alternated, hence giving prominence to verbal or visible actions together to maximise time-management and selling opportunities across their pitch.

In Excerpt 11 below, AVR4 is offering LED light bulbs. Among all the products offered by AVs in our corpus, LED bulbs can present a higher number of disadvantages, especially as far as their manipulation and demonstration are concerned (cf. headphones and water balloons), as illustrated in Table 2 below.
Once AV4R has positioned herself in a central location in the coach (see section 4.1) without obstructing passengers’ movement, she prepares the LED lights to sell. She carries a small trolley to store the rest of the bulbs (image 13C below); hence, embodying the storage room of a shop. It takes her almost 19 seconds to get the product ready (images 13D, 13E) before starting the sales pitch and presenting the product (Excerpt 11.1, line 2 below). She first gets a light bulb out of the trolley for display and then a portable power source that she places by her side within easy reach (image 13C-E).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General characteristics</th>
<th>LED lights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>Generic (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Big (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Fragile (glass) (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption</td>
<td>Home – not immediate (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test product</td>
<td>Difficult (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Offer (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refund</td>
<td>No return/ no refund policy (-)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Advantages (+) and disadvantages (-) of the selling LED lights.
Excerpt 11.1: AV4R

1 AV4R  ((walks and stands in the clearing of the coach))
2 # (18.8)

Opening the sales pitch from a stationary point

After positioning herself and starting the sales pitch, AV4R deals with the difficulty of being interrupted by another vendor offering products in the same coach (Excerpt 11.2, lines 3-14 below). Excerpt 11.2 captures how space is negotiated among co-workers before AV4R re-starts the pitch with a verbatim repetition of her previous attempt (lines 13-14).
In both the initiation and re-initiation of the opening the vendor performs an extended “how-are-you”, formatted in a generic form first (“hola ¿qué tal?”, line 3) and then in a more personalised extended greeting (lines 4 and 14). She inserts the formal 2nd person plural (“ustedes:les”) with which she addresses the passengers as a collective and conveys respectful distance (Márquez Reiter and Placencia 2004) by recognising the passengers’ rights to unobtrusive journeys and the relational asymmetries between them.

Product presentation and demonstration

Next, the vendor announces the imminent introduction of the product. She does this by raising her hand with the light bulb towards the collective of the passengers while incrementally unpacking the general benefits of the product (“something useful, necessary”, Excerpt 11.3, line 16) without yet naming the product. In deploying this cataphoric reference (Leisch and Missagh 2019) and “forward-gesturing” with her right hand (Streeck 2009), she
indicates that the product will soon be revealed and creates an expectation for it, increasing the potential for attention and visibility of the product before it is named. In holding the bulb with one hand first, then with both hands and then raising one hand holding the bulb towards the visible upper periphery (Image 13G-I), she acts as a “rack” for the items on sale. This indicates the skilful manoeuvring of some of the working conditions she faces while the train is on the move, and the sequential complementarity between modalities to grab the passengers’ attention in a time-sensitive manner.

Excerpt 11.3: AV4R

15 ❧voy a presentar, (1.7) algo útil= I’m going to present something useful
16 = necesario = para el hogar. (0.7) necessary for your home

![Images showing AV4R holding the bulb in different positions.]

After this, AV4R presents the product verbally while simultaneously holding the light bulb for display (Excerpt 11.4, lines 17-21 below), combining technical and lay information for better product recognisability (lines 19-20). Concurrently to asserting one of its benefits (i.e., its energy-efficiency), she demonstrates how the product works using a power source (see also Excerpt 13.5, line 28), thus showing the confluence of modalities. Enhancement of
product visibility is done through the subsequent lifting of the product and the light emanating from it (see Excerpt 14.5, line 24).

Excerpt 11.4: AV4R

{(holds bulb with right hand->1.21)}
17 ↑↓ DO: S medidas de lámpara. (0.22)
   Two bulb sizes
18 lámpara led. (0.14)
   LED bulb
19 ≟ para algunos la lámpara de luz día,
   known to some as daylight lamp
20 ≟ para otros la lámpara blanca. (0.45)
   to others as white lamp
{(from 1.16-> )}{(screws bulb in power source->1.22)}
21 la luz blanca. (.) .@ovio, (.) las dos de bajo consumo. (0.45)
   white light lamp (.) obviously (.) both energy-efficient

#13J

#13J: screws bulb in.

AV4R later verbally unpacks the technical and personal affordances of the product in the form of a list, and divides the description into two, orienting to each lamp size in turn. She presents the features of the product displaying her professional knowledge of it, ensuring they are understandable to passengers by providing practical examples and using reformulations (e.g., Excerpt 11.5, lines 25-26 below) of the technical information presented.

At this point, AV4R tackles a further disadvantage of the product and the conditions under which it is being sold; it cannot be refunded or exchanged post-sale. By physically demonstrating its use live and early in the pitch, any potential passenger misgivings as to its proper functioning are pre-empted.
The verbal product presentation and bodily demonstration of its functioning are two separate actions of the pitch which, in this case, are done in parallel. Each bodily demonstration happens alongside the verbal introduction of the potential uses of each kind of lamp (5 watts lamp in lines 22-26, 10 watts lamp in lines 27-29), and provides visual evidence of their lighting power by testing each lamp with a power source.

However, while testing the first bulb, AV4R encounters a problem with the power source: it does not turn on. This is an unexpected issue that she handles promptly by unscrewing the
lamp and trying again, verbally lengthening the word “para::/fo::r” and then momentarily suspending the verbal part of the pitch (lines 23-24). Once the problem is solved, she resumes the pitch by repeating verbatim what was said prior to the interruption and continues her pitch (line 25) while simultaneously holding the now lit bulb.

Further technical features of the product are presented and accompanied with prosodically-matched reformulations using lay terms (Excerpt 11.6, lines 30-32 below, also Figure 6).

Excerpt 11.6: AV4R

```
30 ((points at the bulb))
tiene más watts. = ¡más potencia. (0.4) *
it’s got more watts more power
31 son *inroom*ible. (. ) #exists:ncia a la lluvia.= They are unbreakable (“inbreakable”) (. ) resistant to the rain
Img. #13S
32 = >no se queman.< (0.6) they don’t burn out
```

13S: flicks fingers against bulb

Figure 6. Acoustic visualisation (f0 and intensity trace) of intonational configuration of the reformulating parentheticals.

The flicking allows once again to simultaneously describe and visually demonstrate the product. The durability features of the product are illustrated visually, making another form
of “forward-gesturing”: the lamp’s sturdiness is demonstrated with four strong and noisy flicks of the finger against the bulb (marked with * in lines 30-31, see also images 14S-14T) before the shatterproof feature is presented verbally. The body of the vendor again works like a rack: with one hand as a ‘buoy’ (see Liddell, Vogt-Svendsen, and Bergman 2007 for the use of holds in sign language) holding the product, and the other one in motion pointing at its affordances (e.g., power, durability and resistance).

Offer and quality control

At the end of the middle of the sales pitch, the vendor announces the price and offer in preparation to the opening of the sales space, a new interactional space where the next relevant action would be a product inspection or purchase by the passengers. AV4R formulates the presentation of the offer in ways that are syntactically common to most AV sales pitches: through topicalisation as fronted direct objects (Excerpt 11.7- “this lamp…”, line 33, “the offer”, line 36) and the use of periphrastic future tense - things that are “going to” happen - to refer to the price of the lamps (“per unit you will be paying”) with which she articulates a future passengers’ action in a non-imposing way. Likewise, the recommendation to take the offer is done in the passive voice (“they are offers to be taken”, line 38). Part of this stage also involves a proposal to re-test the product. Having demonstrated its proper functioning earlier in the sales pitch, AV4R reassures passengers that all products have been tested (line 41) but that the invitation is open for passengers to check for themselves (line 43). This allows the AV to identify prospects.
While the special offer is presented verbally (lines 33-36), the visible bodily action is once again one step ahead of the sequence of the sales activity, hence carried out as a relatively separate action displayed in parallel. AV4R is preparing a set of bags with two boxes of lamps each (images 13U-13X), which she will eventually use during the coach round to offer the products to the passengers individually. The verbal pitch is, therefore, constructed in the present with projections into immediate future actions, while visible bodily actions prepare the merchandise for next actions (i.e., setting herself as the shop rack and window display) before approaching the passengers’ seats and initiating the opening of the sales floor.

Summarised upshot of sales pitch

AVR4 opens the sales floor by beginning her forward motion, walking along the coach and moving her torso slightly from left to right. She shows the product by holding it with her arm
raised for the passengers to see (Excerpt 11.8, images13Y-13Z) while providing a verbal summarised upshot of its technical affordances, as well as the price and offer, creating thus an extended middle of the pitch. The bags with the products are carried up and down the coach hanging from her wrists, while holding one box with a lamp in her hand (Excerpt 11.8, image 13AA).

Excerpt 11.8: AV4R

((walks along the coach > 1.46))

44 lámpara #led. (.) para la iluminación del hogar. = eh?
   LED lamp (.) to light up your home = huh?
   Img. #13Y
45 [do:is por dosci:gnos pesos.(0.6)
   Two for two hundred pesos
46 para el comedor. = el baño. = la cocina.(0.2)
   For the dining room the bathroom the kitchen
   ((turns around and walks in the opposite direction > 1.50))
47 tamiñón tenemos para el velador. = eh? (0.8)
   We also have some for the bedside lamp, huh?
48 lah dos. = por dosci:gnos pesos la ofer:ta. = eh?
   (0.6)
   Two for two hundred pesos the offer = huh?
   Img. #13R
49 dosci:gnos pesos abyan= las dos lámpara led = eh?
   two hundred pesos you pay for two led lamps = huh?
   ((turns around and walks in the opposite direction to end of coach))
50 (1.1)
51 lámpara inrompi ble.(0.6)
   unbreakable ("inbreakable") lamp
52 son resistanteh a la lluvia = eh?
   They are rain-resistant = huh?
53 no: se abyan = eh? (0.7)
   They don’t burn out = huh?
54 doci:gnos pesos lo que abyan = eh?
   two hundred pesos what you pay = huh?
55 [dosci:gnos pesos la ofer:ta::
   two hundred pesos the offer
   Img. #13AA
   ((moves to next section of the coach))

The analysis shows that verbal and bodily actions supplement each other throughout the examples, in most cases they happen simultaneously or consecutively to each other in a latched manner to maximise the AVs’ presence and augment the visibility of positive products’ characteristics. The contingencies surrounding some of the products (i.e., lightbulbs) and the space of the train means that verbal actions sometimes precede bodily actions (hands, arm movement) oriented to the passengers (e.g., looking for bulbs) and thus lag speech. In such cases, it has been seen how the AV concurrently engages in both verbal
actions oriented to the passengers and bodily actions (manipulating the product) oriented to
the imminent evidencing of the product's characteristics or quality.

6. Conclusion

This article examined the achievement of sales pitches on a Buenos Aires trainline as seen
from the visual field of the AVs’ at chest level. It adopted a multimodal pragmatic
perspective that considered how speech, salient prosodic features of voice manipulation, and
visible bodily actions – product manipulation, hand movement, walking, turning around-
were assembled in real-time and space as part of AVs’ working practices.

The analysis of the video-recordings revealed three stages and components of the sales
pitches. AVs’ shifts from a stationary lower bodily position to movement (walking) in the
coach marked a threshold between the pre-sales stage, where the merchandise is organised
from a stationary point in the clearing of the coach; the sales pitch, where vocal activity
marked by greater loudness and higher pitch is accompanied by the extended use of hands
and arms for lifting, demonstrating and pointing at the products while still standing in a
stationary position in the coach; and the summarised upshot opening the sales space, with
AVs’ movement forward towards the corridor with torquing type of body movement to both
sides while holding and showing the products on offer to passengers sitting on either side of
the coach.

In the opening of the sales pitch, AVs physically position themselves and prepare the ‘shop
floor’ with an access ritual. The middle of the pitch comprised product presentation and
demonstration, quality control, and announcement of the offer, in a bid to act as a shop
counter for potential buyers to reach the products on offer next to their seats. It has been
shown how AVs construct the space of the train coach as a pop-up mobile store and how their practices embody many of the structural aspects of a store (e.g., use of arms and hands as a window display to hold and show products and increase their visibility, use of an unobstructive space in the coach as storage).

AVs demonstrated a great degree of deftness in simultaneously and sequentially coordinating visible bodily actions to support and supplement actions carried out verbally. Visible bodily practices augment elements of the verbal part of the sales pitch, such as pointing at and demonstrating a described feature of the product, and act as more efficient ways of providing evidence of quality instead of having to engage in complex procedural explanations. They may also occur independently of the verbal description (e.g., screwing the lamp while listing technical features, putting the lights in boxes while announcing the offer) and are oriented to maximising passenger attention towards the upcoming offer and purchasing opportunity as well as increasing efficiency in the face of time-sensitivity.

This study outlined some the multiple lexical, grammatical, and prosodic practices AVs draw on to increase passengers’ attention. The sales pitch was performed with a higher volume and pitch range and a voice quality that is tenser than when they interact with co-workers, including stylised contours and sound lengthening reminiscent of proclamatory speech. Other elements which were geared to reeling in potential prospects included the use of cataphoric references to the product to build up interest and direct object fronting, product descriptions in the periphrastic future to introduce a unique buying opportunity, and the use of reformulations while listing the technical affordances of the product. They were presented in ways that displayed AVs’ knowledge of the products and audience orientation, as evidenced
by the way technical vocabulary was presented as an appositional with a view to simplifying complex information.

This article provided the first multimodal pragmatic analysis of the verbal and visible bodily practices that a group of AVs recur to in pursuit of their daily sustenance against some of the structural dimensions they inhabit as workers of the informal economy. These include their constrained agency relative to the products available for sale on any given day, and the unregulated nature of their work (lack of workers’ rights and protection), as witnessed by their orientation to the legitimate position that passengers occupy on trains vis à vis their own. This was also observed by bodily practices oriented to passengers’ right of way, the initiation of the sales encounters by accounting for their own presence, and the verbal practices in the sales pitch, constructed as a unique opportunity to bring instantaneous delivery of products to passengers’ seats.

The practices reported in this paper were found to be product- and space-contingent. Future studies of products which, according to our corpus, require less extended pitches, such as beverages, will allow us to gain a more encompassing picture of the diversity of communicative practices that AVs draw on, and how these practices are assembled relative to the products on sale and levels of congestion on train coaches.

Within the ecology of a space where passengers and AVs are together, but also independent as the objective of their presence on the train is not coterminous with one another’s, creating and sustaining passengers’ interest in mundane products represents yet another challenge in their lives; one that these AVs skilfully manage as part of working on the trains.
Professionalism is not usually associated with workers of the popular economy such as AVs. However, this first real-time live conduct analysis of this group of AVs demonstrates the normative coordination of well-organised working practices that are conducted in a planful and orderly way.

References


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1 The informal economy is a politico-economic process at the core of many developing and developed countries (Baruah 2023). Informal economy workers such as AVs lack legal and social benefits and have to ignore health and safety issues to sustain their livelihoods. In Argentina, as well as in other Latin American countries where AV constitutes a pervasive working practice, AVs are best described as workers of the popular economy. “Popular economy” recognises the skills, abilities and dynamic strategies through which workers question, negotiate and attempt to change established socio-economic orders (see Fernández Álvarez and Pacifico 2022 with special attention to workers of the popular economy in Argentina).

2 See also (Alonso Piñero 2018) on mitigation and politeness in informal vendors’ sales pitch in Mexico City’s subway system and Solon (2013) on touristic service encounters in Yucatán, Mexico.

3 The study was possible thanks to an SRA International Development and Inclusive Innovation grant. (PI: R. Márquez Reiter) in collaboration with CITRA-CONICET-UMET. The four ambulant vendors who participated in the project are part of a workers’ cooperative collaborating with CITRA (https://citra.org.ar). (Ethical clearance reference: Open University HREC/3291 Márquez Reiter 14/04/2021)

4 Alfajor is a typical type of confectionary. It consists of soft, cornstarch cookies that are filled with gooey dulce de leche (a caramel-like spread).