

The Oral Production of Discourse Markers by Advanced Learners of Spanish

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Abstract: This study seeks to investigate the way in which advanced Spanish learners do or do not produce various discourse markers in their speech. Although discourse markers and other related features are crucial for cohesive and fluid communication, few studies have been done on pragmatic acquisition or discourse markers in Spanish, and none have addressed advanced learners. Based on Llanos and González's (2014) study of intermediate Spanish speakers, the present study utilizes a corpus of elicited speech to compare how advanced learners and native Spanish speakers use connectors, reformulators, discourse operators, and conversational markers when completing an interview and a photo description task. Results of the preliminary distributional and descriptive findings show that the advanced learners seem to have acquired a native-like usage of discourse markers, both in frequency and in function. The findings of the present study suggest that discourse markers are linguistic structures acquired in the late stages of acquisition.

Keywords: Advancedness, discourse markers, second language acquisition, Spanish

1. Introduction

Discourse markers, such as *so*, *well*, or *however*, are widely known to be an essential part of the oral and written production of fluid, well-structured discourse. While the acquisition of these markers has been studied in a variety of language pairs (English and Spanish: Romero-Trillo 2002; English and Swedish: Aijmer 2004; English and German: Müller 2005; English and Dutch: Buysse 2006; English and Chinese: Liao 2009), the acquisition of these particles by learners of Spanish has yet to be studied at length and has not been sufficiently studied among those with advanced linguistic competency. The present study seeks to further characterize the ways in which advanced learners of Spanish produce various discourse markers in their speech, which markers they produce the most, and how their usage compares to that of their native counterparts. To do so, this study utilizes a corpus of elicited speech from advanced learners and evaluates it via a preliminary distributional and descriptive analysis.

2. Previous research and theoretical framework

2.1 Interlanguage pragmatics

As with any branch of linguistics, pragmatics has many varying definitions. One such explanation previously used in the context of language acquisition is that of Crystal (1997): "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially in the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the

effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication” (319). Interlanguage pragmatics, then, widens this definition to include second language users and learners, specifically focusing on their comprehension and production of speech acts, conversational management, discourse organization, and of the choice of address terms. (Bardovi-Harlig 2013: 69).

While the field has been criticized for a lack of attention to pragmatics in second language acquisition (Langer 2001), some correlations have been established between the two disciplines. For example, the attainment of pragmatic knowledge, the ability to adequately use language in different communicative situations, is essential to the development of Communicative Competence (Hymes 1972; Canale and Swain 1980; Bachman 1990). To achieve this competence, speakers utilize an array of pragmalinguistic resources — the language resources used for pragmatic ends — to convey the appropriate meanings in context. However, these resources are not acquired simultaneously, and the second language user must learn to manage them as their interlanguage develops. In the beginning stages of acquisition, the L2 learner relies on one form for one function before transitioning to making choices between multiple forms for the same function (Bardovi-Harlig 2013: 78). This shift from the one-to-one principle to multifunctionality (Andersen 1990) is exemplified in the acquisition of discourse markers as well. For instance, a Spanish learner may initially only know of the word *entonces* (then/so) as a means of connecting two units of discourse. While straightforward, at this stage the speaker may overuse the marker and thus their speech may seem pragmatically inappropriate from the perspective of a native speaker. As their linguistic competence increases, the learner acquires *luego* (then) a functionally equivalent particle for connecting discourse. At this stage, the learner now has the ability to vary their usage of connectors, increasing their pragmatic abilities, but they are also faced with the difficulties of utilizing them in a pragmatically appropriate manner. The study, such as the present one, of how second language speakers manage these emerging contrasts adds context to how the pragmatic system develops in relation to other elements of linguistic competence.

2.2 Discourse markers: approaches and taxonomies

Discourse markers, also known as discourse particles or pragmatic markers, are a functional class of linguistic mechanisms that signal the potential communicative intentions of the speaker (Schiffrin 1987; Fraser 1996). Although they do not usually change the propositional content of the sentence, they are fundamental for structuring the discourse, since they indicate the speaker's attitudes towards the expressed proposition and facilitate the processes of pragmatic inferences (Furko 2017: 2). Although they have been widely studied in the field since the late twentieth century, a comprehensive typology of these markers does not exist. However, a general distinction can be made regarding the functions of discourse markers. As Aijmer (2002) discusses, discourse particles serve a textual function and an interpersonal function. The former of these concerns the structuring of discourse while the latter refers to the expression of the speaker's attitudes (414). For the purposes of the present study, Portolés' (2010) five-type, role-based taxonomy will

be used to categorize Spanish discourse markers (see Figure 1): information structurers (those that permit regular organization of discursive information, creating topics and comments), connectors (those that establish a semantic and pragmatic link between two units of discourse), reformulators (those that introduce a discursive segment as a reformulation of the previous segment), discourse operators (those that make explicit the argumentative force of a discursive unit), and conversational markers (those that function to maintain or confirm the state of the communicative interaction) (Robles and Bertomeu 2017: 6-8).

Figure 1: Classification of Spanish discourse markers

| Marker Class | Examples |
|-------------------------|--|
| Information structurers | <i>dicho esto</i> (that being said), <i>primero</i> (first), <i>por último</i> (lastly), <i>por cierto</i> (by the way), <i>cambiando de tema</i> (changing the subject) |
| Connectors | <i>es más</i> (moreover), <i>incluso</i> (even), <i>al fin</i> (finally), <i>entonces</i> (then/so), <i>luego</i> (then), <i>por tanto</i> (therefore), <i>a consecuencia</i> (consequently), <i>a cambio</i> (instead), <i>al contrario</i> (on the contrary) |
| Reformulators | <i>es decir</i> (that is), <i>o sea</i> (that is), <i>quiero decir</i> (I mean), <i>mejor dicho</i> (or rather), <i>en otras palabras</i> (in other words), <i>en resumen</i> (in summary), <i>en pocas palabras</i> (in a few words) |
| Discourse operators | <i>en realidad</i> (actually), <i>de hecho</i> (in fact), <i>por ejemplo</i> (for example), <i>en particular</i> (especially), <i>naturalmente</i> (naturally) |
| Conversational markers | <i>bien</i> (well), <i>bueno</i> (well), <i>efectivamente</i> (for sure), <i>claro</i> (of course), <i>sin duda</i> (without a doubt), <i>hombre</i> (dude), <i>escucha</i> (listen), <i>mira</i> (look), <i>venga</i> (come on) |

2.3 The L2 acquisition of discourse markers

Mastering frequently used pragmatic devices, such as discourse markers, is a difficult task for non-native speakers (Llanos and González 2014: 239). Recently, within the last two decades, there has been an increase in the attention to the acquisition of these

markers, most notably in English (Romero-Trillo 2002, 2011; Fuller 2003; Aijmer 2004; Müller 2005; Buysse 2006; Fung and Carter 2007; Polat 2011; Zhao 2013). As for this research in Spanish, there are few studies which have directly addressed the acquisition of these items. Of those, both written and oral production have been studied. Regarding the former, Fernández (1990, 1997) included a short list of discourse markers (namely connective markers) in her error analysis of written texts. As for spoken data, Nogueira (2011) analyzed oral narratives of upper-intermediate level Brazilian learners, comparing their usage of discourse markers to those found in Spanish textbooks. Her results found that the learners used Spanish discourse markers extensively and correctly, perhaps due to the existence of parallel markers in their native Portuguese. She also argued that existing pedagogical materials did not adequately represent the discourse markers used by the learners, and that it is necessary to better inform teachers and learners about the importance of discourse markers in producing and interpreting texts at an upper-intermediate level. Similarly, De la Fuente (2009) investigated the influence of the type of instruction on acquisition of discourse markers. A group of advanced undergraduate learners of Spanish were given either explicit or implicit instruction about four previously unknown discourse markers: *o sea* (that is), *puesto que* (because), *entre tanto* (meanwhile), and *en cuanto a* (regarding). Then, the two learner groups had to recall the target items in a series of assessment tasks. Their results showed that the learners exposed to an explicit focus on form exhibited significantly higher immediate comprehension and retrieval of the discourse markers than their implicit instruction counterparts. Most recently, Llanos and González (2014) analyzed the oral production of discourse particles by intermediate learners of Spanish. Essentially a parallel study to the present investigation, two groups (one of learners and another of native speakers) participated in an interview and photo description task that was subsequently analyzed for various types of discourse markers: connectors, reformulators, argumentative operators, and conversational markers. A distributional analysis of the data revealed a slight increase in the use of these markers from A2 to B1 (Common European Framework of Reference), although production was consistently lower than that of native speakers. The present study, then, seeks to add to this literature by analyzing for the first time how advanced learners of Spanish use discourse markers in spontaneous spoken language.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

The present study seeks to further characterize this phenomenon through the pursuit of two questions:

RQ1: With what frequency are discourse markers used by advanced Spanish learners?

RQ2: Which discourse markers are used most frequently?

RQ3: How do advanced learners' usage patterns compare to those of native speakers?

3.2 Data

To answer the above questions, this investigation makes use of the Spanish Learner Language Oral Corpus 1 (SPLLOC)¹, a contemporary collection of oral L2 Spanish compiled by the universities of Southampton, Newcastle, and York in the United Kingdom. The project consists of extensive samples of spoken Spanish produced by 60 students of the language, all English L1 speakers who learned Spanish in educational contexts. Bilingual or heritage speakers were excluded from the sample. The learners were classified into three different proficiency groups based on Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR):

Figure 2: SPLLOC Corpus Participants

| L2 Spanish level | Age | Hours of Spanish instruction | Educational level (UK) | Position on CEFR scale |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Beginners (N = 20) | 13-14 years | 180 hours | Lower secondary school | A2 |
| Intermediate (N = 20) | 17-18 years | 750 hours | Sixth form college | B1-B2 |
| Advanced (N = 20) | 21-22 years | 895 hours and 1 year abroad | University | C1-C2 |

Additionally, the corpus includes samples from native Spanish speakers, five at each age level, who performed the same range of tasks.

Regarding those tasks, the participants performed a range of five to seven exercises, depending on their language level: an individual interview and description of a photograph, a retelling of a visual narrative, a retelling of a written narrative, a pair discussion with another learner, a clitic pronouns production task, a clitics interpretation task, and a word order task. The data were collected on site by a team of native Spanish speakers trained in data elicitation, and the recordings of the tasks were transcribed by the research team.

3.3 Procedure

For this investigation, a total of 30 participants were randomly selected to be included in the analysis: 15 advanced learners and 15 native speakers. To capture the most natural speech (and to improve the study's comparability to previous research), only the data from the SPLLOC's individual interview and photograph description task were included. This interview was administered in three parts: first, the learners were shown a

¹ The corpus can be accessed at <http://www.splloc.soton.ac.uk>

series of six stimulus photographs (of young Britons on vacation in Mexico) and were asked to spontaneously describe the various scenes and activities; second, they were instructed to ask questions to find out as much additional information as they can about the characters shown in the pictures; and third, the researchers asked the learner a range of questions about their current interests, their past activities, and their plans for the future. To analyze these texts for the current study, tokens were extracted from the interview transcriptions and categorized according to the discourse marker typology utilized by Llanos and González (2014):

Figure 3: List of Analyzed Discourse Markers

| Marker Class | Examples |
|-------------------------|---|
| Information structurers | <i>N/A</i> |
| Connectors | <i>entonces</i> (then/so), <i>por eso</i> (therefore), <i>luego</i> (then) |
| Reformulators | <i>como</i> (like), <i>es que</i> (it's that), <i>o sea</i> (that is), <i>quiero decir</i> (I mean) |
| Discourse operators | <i>por ejemplo</i> (for example) |
| Conversational markers | <i>vale</i> (okay), <i>pues</i> (well), <i>bueno</i> (well), <i>claro</i> (of course), <i>okay</i> , <i>por favor</i> (please), <i>a ver</i> (let's see), <i>sabes</i> (you know), <i>muy bien</i> (very well), <i>mira</i> (look), <i>por supuesto</i> (of course), <i>oye</i> (hey) |

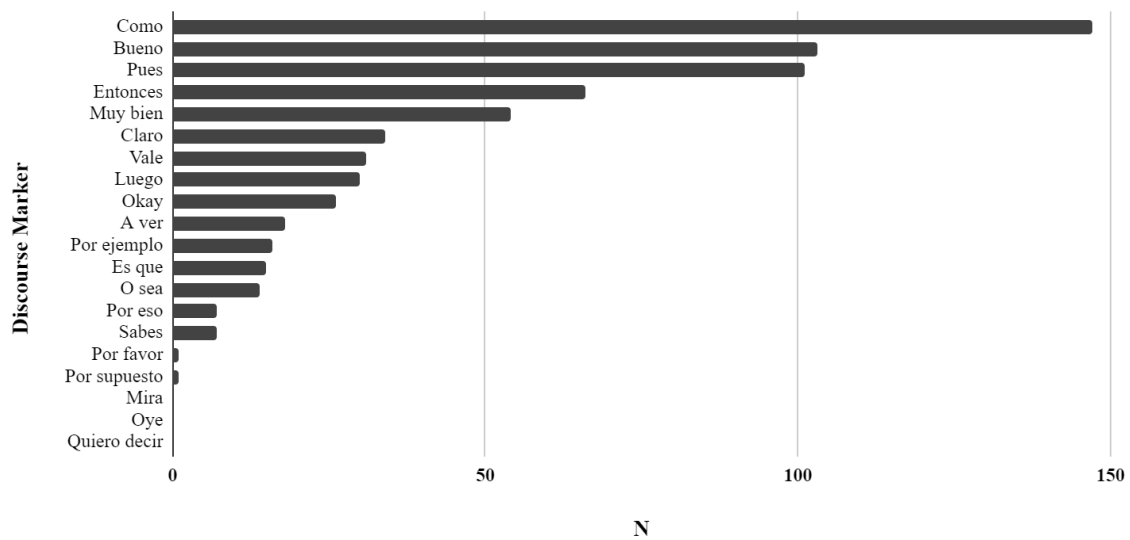
Information structurers were not present in the corpus and therefore were not included in the final analysis. Once isolated, the individual and group frequencies of the tokens were calculated for both the advanced learner and native speaker groups. Details of the analyses are presented in the next section.

4. Results

4.1 Distributional analysis of advanced learners' discourse marker usage

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the frequencies of each discourse marker utilized by the advanced learner group, individually and by class.

Figure 4: Number and Frequency of Discourse Markers – Advanced



Out of the twenty discourse markers, *como* (like) (22%), *bueno* (well) (15%), and *pues* (well) (15%) were overwhelmingly favored by the advanced learners. None of the other markers were used more than 10% of the time, and fourteen of the particles were used in less than 5% of the data. *Mira* (look), *oye* (hey), and *quiero decir* (I mean) were all absent from their speech.

Figure 5: Number and Frequency of Discourse Markers by Class - Advanced

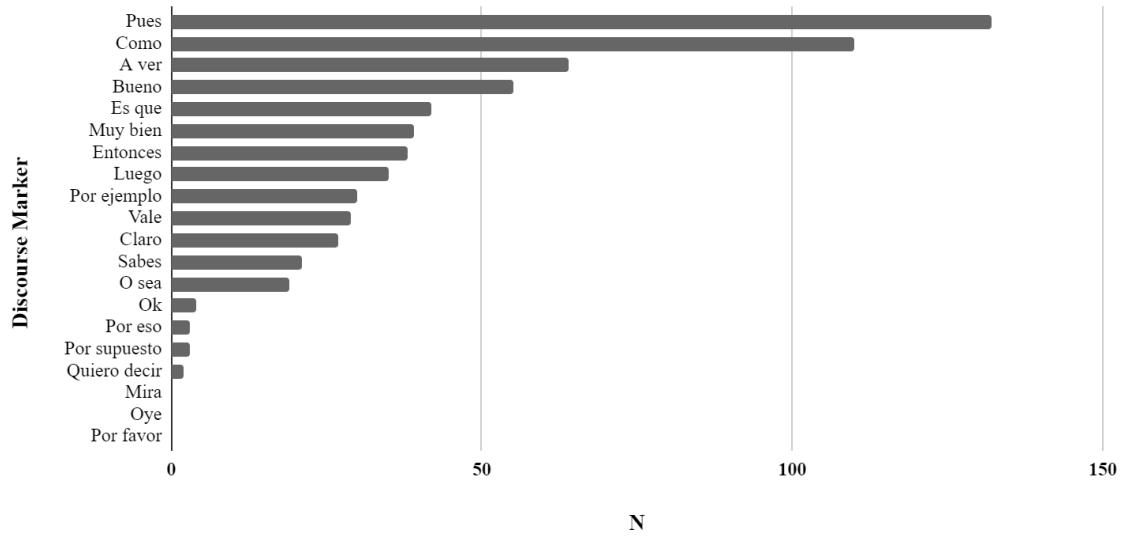
| Marker Class | N | Frequency |
|------------------------|------------|-------------|
| Connectors | 103 | 15.4% |
| Reformulators | 176 | 26.2% |
| Discourse operators | 16 | 2.4% |
| Conversational markers | 376 | 56% |
| Total | 671 | 100% |

In terms of marker class, conversational markers (56%) were most frequently used by the learner group, followed by reformulators and connectors. Discourse operators (2.4%) were relatively unutilized by the group.

4.2 Distributional analysis of native speakers' discourse marker usage

Figures 6 and 7 illustrate the frequencies of each discourse marker utilized by the native speaker group, individually and by class.

Figure 6: Number and Frequency of Discourse Markers – Native



The native speakers most frequently used *pues* (well) (22%), *como* (like) (18%), and *a ver* (let's see) (11%). As with the learner group, none of the other markers were used in more than 10% of the data, and half of the markers were used less than 5% of the time. *Por favor* (please), *mira* (look) and *oye* (hey) were absent from their speech.

Figure 7: Number and Frequency of Discourse Markers by Class - Native

| Marker Class | N | Frequency |
|------------------------|------------|-------------|
| Connectors | 38 | 6.2% |
| Reformulators | 173 | 28.3% |
| Discourse operators | 30 | 4.9% |
| Conversational markers | 370 | 60.6% |
| Total | 611 | 100% |

Regarding marker class, conversational markers (61%) were the most favored by the native speakers, followed by reformulators (28%). Both connectors and discourse operators appeared less frequently in this group's speech.

5. Discussion

The distributional analysis of individual discourse marker use indicates that both advanced learners and native speakers of Spanish utilize these particles in largely similar

ways. These section details those similarities as they relate to the study's research questions.

5.1 With what frequency are discourse markers used by advanced Spanish learners?

As for overall usage rates, the advanced learners used slightly more discourse markers than the native group (671 versus 611, respectively). The disparity is small, however, and could potentially be attributed to individual differences in the participants. These results differ great from Llanos and González' (2014) findings, where intermediate learners produced significantly lower rates of discourse markers compared to native speakers. Bearing that in mind, the similar rates of usage found in the present study are of special interest seeing as they suggest that, at least in terms of overall frequency, advanced learners appear to have attained a native-like usage of discourse markers.

5.2 Which discourse markers are used most frequently?

Both *pues* (well) and *como* (like) were used most frequently by both groups. Considering the context of the task, these results are not necessarily surprising as *pues* is a common filler used when responding to questions (as in an interview) and *como* is a useful reformulator for circumlocution. Interestingly, these were also among the most frequently used discourse markers by Llanos and González' (2014) learners and native speakers, further indicating that the communicative context of the experimental tasks influenced which markers could be utilized. As for the markers that were absent in the participants' speech, *mira* (look) and *oye* (hey) were the only particles to be unused by both advanced learners and native speakers. The lack of these markers, both utilized to call the interlocutor's attention to something, can be explained by their inappropriateness for the communicative context of a structured interview with a stranger. *Quiero decir* (I mean) was absent from the advanced learner's speech, however the existence of a more common and somewhat equivalent marker, like *o sea* (that is) could explain the learners' underutilization of this form. As with the most frequent markers, the underutilized *mira*, *oye*, and *quiero decir* all appeared less than five times in the Llanos and González (2014) data, again demonstrating that intermediate, advanced, and native speakers of Spanish use relatively similar discourse markers in this interactional context. Like *o sea* and *quiero decir*, other pair of functional equivalents in the data are *entonces* (then/so) and *luego* (then), which native speakers used at relatively equal rates. However, the learner group preferred *entonces* over *luego*. Further qualitative analysis is required to determine the possible cause of this lexical preference. The learners also preferred the use of *okay* over their native counterparts, most likely due to the influence of their first language.

5.3 How do advanced learners' usage patterns compare to those of native speakers?

The results for classes of discourse markers revealed similar trends, as both groups utilized the different types in the same order: conversational markers were the most frequent, followed by reformulators, connectors, and discourse operators. A similar pattern was observed in the Llanos and González (2014) study, where both learners and native speakers used an abundance of conversational markers and connectors and used hardly any

information structurers (which were totally absent in the present study). The dominance of conversational markers can not only be explained by them being the largest class, but also by the conversational nature of the interview task. Conversely, discourse operators were infrequent overall, due to *por ejemplo* (for example) being the only member of that class. Advanced learners utilized connectors 10% more than the native speakers, a slight increase that could potentially be explained by the learners' reliance on explicitly connecting each of their statements, perhaps as a hypercorrection. However, as with the first data set, the most crucial findings of this analysis are that advanced learners coincide with native speakers in how they utilize different classes of discourse markers.

6. Conclusions

All in all, the preliminary descriptive quantitative findings of this study suggest that the advanced learners have acquired a native-like usage of discourse markers. Not only did both the learner and native speaker groups utilize similar rates of these markers globally, but they also used them in typologically similar patterns. Seeing as previous studies indicated the inability of intermediate learners to achieve native-like competence in this area, the findings of the present study may indicate that discourse markers (and by extension, pragmatic competence) are linguistic structures acquired in the late stages of acquisition. Nonetheless, more detailed investigation is required to confirm or deny these claims. As this research continues, extensive qualitative analysis of the data is required to determine whether advanced learners are truly functioning like native speakers at the utterance level.

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