

**SYSTEMIC TOOLS TO ESTABLISH APPROPRIACY IN
DISCOURSE: THE CASE OF INTERJECTIONS IN ENGLISH
AND SPANISH CONVERSATIONS¹**

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ABSTRACT

The present article discusses the different realisations of interjections which fulfill the feedback function in English and Spanish conversations. The study, which follows previous research on the contrastive analysis of discourse functions in English and Spanish (Romero Trillo, 1994a & b, 1997), will establish the main parameters of use of these elements in both languages. The methodology will follow Halliday's notion of "continuative themes," which is expanded via the concept of "re-grammaticalization" in order to capture the multifunctional value of these elements, and as a means to explain the notion of "discourse appropriacy" (Romero Trillo & Espigares Pinilla, forthcoming). The study will conclude by showing the differences in the use of interjections in both languages, as well as suggesting some pedagogical implications for future research.

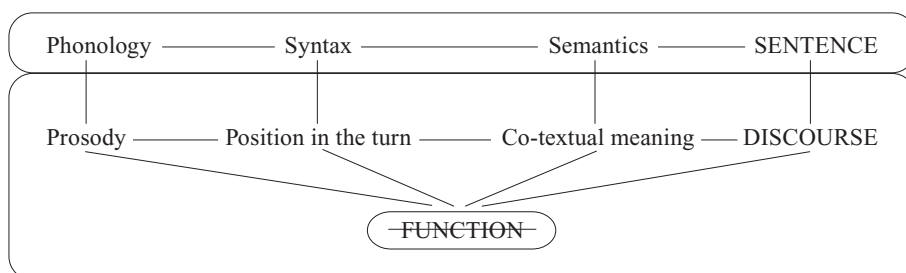
1. INTRODUCTION

The present article discusses the different realisations of the feedback function in English and Spanish conversations. The study, which follows previous research on the contrastive analysis of discourse functions in English and Spanish (Romero Trillo, 1994a & b, 1997), will establish the main parameters of use of feedback elements in both languages. Specifically, the analysis will concentrate on the behaviour of "continuative elements" —following Halliday's notion of "continuative themes"— which

I define as “elements which function as interaction-organizers in conversation by means of their prosodic features, their position in the turn and their co-textual meaning” (Romero Trillo, 1997:205).

Any analyst who has tried to describe language according to functional labels has found enormous difficulties when trying to pin down all the variables that constitute the basic ingredients of a function. These variables, in contrast to syntactic or morphological analysis, exist independently of the function and are often spread throughout the text. This task increases its challenges in the case of spoken language because of its immediacy, and its ephemeral nature. In this light, there are three variables that I consider essential in the analysis of discourse: prosody, position in the turn, and co-textual meaning.

These discourse parameters represent the evolution of the traditional categories in sentence analysis. In other words, discourse categories depend on the sentence level features of a text, but their value overrides the addition of the individual meanings of the items that compose it. This extra meaning is what we call function —i.e. the force— that a combination of certain linguistic items in use acquires. Here is an outline of the process:²



The graph shows that phonology evolves into prosody; syntax into position, i.e., the analysis of the situation of the elements in their higher rank structure; and semantics into co-textual meaning, all this in a structured fractal dimension.

This approach enables us to view the evolution of sentence categories into discourse categories and the intrinsic relationship of the different layers of linguistic analysis until we arrive at the category of function. Most elements in language can be subjected to analysis in both layers, however, continuative elements can only be studied in the discourse layer, and in direct correlation to their functions.

In my opinion, the most noticeable feature of these elements is that they do not belong to a specific grammatical class, i.e., they may be verbs, adjectives, nouns, interjections, etc... By way of illustration, English continuative elements could be verbs: “look, listen;” nouns: “God, goodness” adjectives: “fine;” phrases: “you know, I mean;” interjections: “oh, yep.” This feature can be accounted for with the notion of “grammaticalisation,” i.e.: the transition from a lexical category to a new status with different meaning and relationships —as in the case of the English “will” which suffered a shift from the meaning of “volition” to the indication of the future (Romero

Trillo, 1998). However, the fact that these elements appear in discourse, and not at sentence level, enables us to adopt a new perspective on the process of grammaticalisation. In other words, the continuative elements do not grammaticalise in the traditional sense but, on the contrary, they climb onto a new linguistic layer that makes them articulate discourse: i.e., they become the hinges on which discourse opens and closes. While following the same patterns that other elements follow at sentence level, the continuative elements benefit from the three different grammaticalisation processes with this new perspective:

- * grammaticalisation: a lexical element acquires a new meaning in discourse; e.g. “well” to start and finish a topic
- * re-grammaticalisation: an element with no “root” meaning becomes meaningful in discourse; e.g. “ah” to indicate surprise.
- * de-grammaticalisation: a grammatical element acquires a different meaning in discourse; e.g. “no” as a turn-initiator.

Since the category of continuative elements is basic to the inherent structure of monologic and dialogic discourse —they constitute the “scaffolding” for spoken language—, and they do not respond to traditional grammatical categorisations, I believe in the need to describe spoken discourse from a new perspective.

The first step, as I have shown elsewhere (Romero Trillo & Espigares Pinilla, forthcoming), is the establishment of clearcut appraisal parameters of a piece of discourse by eliminating the notion of “grammaticality” and with the introduction of the concept “discourse appropriacy.” The notion of grammaticality implies that grammar obeys standard norms which are clearly established and defined; the production of linguistic structures that elude these norms falls into the category of agrammaticality. However, discourse does not follow strict rules and varies depending on many social, linguistic and personal factors; therefore, the study of discourse needs to take into account all the manifestations of a given item realising different functions, and the realisation of a function by a variety of elements. The probabilistic study of these realisations will give the linguist the regularities of language in use beyond the sentence level. This approach, which is intrinsic to systemic functional linguistics because it departs from the selection of valid options according to the functions, shows the eventual preference of speakers in the selection of one element for one particular function.

The second step would consist in the construction of a discourse grammar that, apart from these linguistic factors which are mathematically modelled, may consider register —field, tenor and mode— as a normalising factor. This would enable linguists to build grammars of use according to different users of a language.

The present study is an attempt to describe the real use of English and Spanish continuative elements which realise the feedback function, and will account for the different resources that both languages present in their realisations. The analysis will indicate the norms of use of a large number of speakers and will show the major trends in both languages. This will enable us not only to establish crosslinguistic differences, but also to assess the difficulties that non-native speakers of each language may find in the process of learning a foreign language.

2. THE FEEDBACK FUNCTION: A DEFINITION

This function, which has also been called “accompaniment function” (Dittmann & Llewellyn, 1967) and “back channel function” (Duncan, 1973) shows the speaker that the addressee of a message is paying attention, i.e., it indicates “appropriate reception of the message.” In order to classify the continuatives in this function I mentioned three parameters above: position in the turn, prosodic information and co-textual meaning. With regard to the position of the element in the conversation two cases can be considered:

- * “turn-constructural elements,” i.e. continuatives that respond to complete units of information and start a turn with new information by a different speaker.
- * “supporting elements,” i.e. continuatives that indicate that the addressee is paying attention and following the content of the message. This confirmation occurs at regular intervals and serves as an orientation for the subsequent discourse.

With regard to the prosodic information conveyed by the continuatives, two kinds of responses can be considered (Heritage, 1984):

- * Neutral: when the information is not completely new, (or is expected).
- * Emphatic: when the information is, or is intended to be, an element of surprise.

These different realisations are expressed by means of intonation with different combinations of the three systems described in Halliday (1967): tonality, tonicity and tone.

The conjunction of these two parameters with the specific co-textual meaning of an element in a conversation will establish the function it realises.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE ELEMENTS UNDER ANALYSIS

English and Spanish have a variety of elements which realise the feedback function:

- * “claro, sí, muy bien, bueno, no me digas, Dios mío, ya...”
- * “Goodness, I know, good, yes, ...”

Since the variety of these elements is enormous, I will concentrate on the description of the interjections. The reason is because these elements do not have any particular root meaning and have suffered a “regrammaticalisation process” (Romero Trillo, in press).³ This process, as I mentioned above, consists in the acquisition of a discursual function by elements which do not have any role from a grammatical perspective. In general terms, the choice of a set of continuative elements that have experienced the same process enables the linguist to make principled comparisons across languages. As a discourse-functional premise, I assume that all languages have a parallel system of continuative elements that can be approached from a grammaticalisation perspective.

The elements that have been selected in the study of both languages are the following: “hm, oh, ah, aha, mhm, hm, yeah, yep.”

In the analysis I have tried to study the same elements in both languages, subsuming under the Spanish “ya” (root meaning: “already”) the English elements “yeah, yep,” which are variations of “yes.” The reason is because the Spanish “ya” is very similar in its phonetic realisation to the English elements, and also realises the feedback function in equivalent contexts *prima facie*.

4. DESCRIPTION OF CORPORA

The data have been obtained from the following corpora:

Esgueva and Cantarero (1981)	<i>El habla de la ciudad de Madrid.</i>
Svartvik and Quirk (1980)	<i>A Corpus of English Conversation.</i>

The Spanish corpus consists of twenty-four conversations classified into six groups, the first four groups have non-surreptitious conversations, and the informants are classified according to their age in the following way:

- First generation: 15 to 24 years
- Second generation: 25 to 35 years
- Third generation: 36 to 55 years
- Fourth generation: 56 onwards.

These conversations are described as “controlled.” The other two groups are formed of “free” dialogues. The total number of words is 134,101.

The English corpus for the present analysis consists of the first ten conversations of the London-Lund corpus. All the conversations are surreptitious. The following are participant features:

- S.1.1. A: male academic, 44
B: male academic, 60
- S.1.2. A: male academic, 43
B: male academic, 42
- S.1.2.a. A: male academic, 45
B: male academic, 41
CAL: telephone caller
- S.1.2.b. A: male academic, 45
B: male academic, 36
- S.1.3. A: female university student, 36
b: female university student, 30
c: male university student, 36
- S.1.4. A: male academic, 48
B: male academic, 48
- S.1.5. A: female secretary, 21

- B: female academic, 25
- C: female academic, 35
- D: female secretary, 21
- S.1.6. A: female academic, 45
- B: male academic, 28
- S.1.7. a: male academic, 30-40
- A: primary school teacher (female), 30
- B: secondary school teacher (male), 30
- S.1.8. A: female academic, 55
- B: female academic, 50
- C: female academic, 23
- S.1.9. a: male academic, 40
- A: female academic, 30
- B: male academic, 40
- C: male academic, 55
- S.1.10 A: university lecturer (female), 52
- b: female academic, 40
- c: businessman, 52

The total number of words in this section of the London-Lund Corpus is 50,000.

Although the Spanish corpus is roughly two and a half times longer than the English one, this fact does not diminish the relevance of the study but, rather, increases the significance of the results, as will be shown below.

5. ANALYSIS OF THE ENGLISH ELEMENTS

The analysis of the English elements was carried out with the help of the prosodic information that was present in the transcriptions.

Here follows the correspondence between Halliday's system (1967, 1970) that I will use in the analysis, and the system used in the corpus

HALLIDAY	SVARTVIK & QUIRK
Tone 1	\
Tone 2	/
Tone 3	=
Tone 4	∨
Tone 5	∧
Tone 13	\ / (2 tonics)
Tone 53	∧ / (2 tonics)

Since not all continuatives carry the tonic, I include what I call "Tone 0" (Romero Trillo, 1994) which indicates the absence of tonicity in the element under study.

In the following description I include a selection of the elements under study, with the tones which are used in that particular function and the position that they

have. The co-text was taken into account in each of the occurrences of the elements but it was obviously impossible to codify. I include one example of each of the functions by way of illustration.

YEAH

NEUTRAL FEEDBACK

* *TONE*: 1,3

* *POSITION*: Supporting

1 7	69	6310	1 1 A	11	^well that :is 'hard 'work# .	/
1 7	69	6320	1 1 B	11	(- coughs) ^=and [[:]# .	/
1 7	70	6330	1 1 A	11	to ^keep the 'kids 'quiet *((for an 'after\oon))#*	/
1 7	70	6340	1 1 B	11	*^tw\o of them#	/
1 7	70	6350	2 1 B	22	^had to 'keep* a :hundred and _eighty	/
1 7	70	6360	1 1 A	11	^y eah # .	/
1 7	70	6350	1 1(B	12	:children :quiet a”^m\used for the /after’noon#	/
1 7	70	6370	1 1 B	11	^so they ‘thought the !b\est thing to ‘do# -	/

YEAH

EMPHATIC FEEDBACK

* *TONE*: 2

* *POSITION*: Supporting

1 4	6610040	1 1 B	11	in “^fact 'Joseph#	/
1 4	6610050	1 1 B	11	with”^out being “:\asked#	/
1 4	6610060	1 1 B	11	^did it him”!s\elf# .	/
1 4	6610070	1 1 B	11	*you ^kn=ow##* -	/
1 4	6610080	1 1 B	11	^fr\ee# -	/
1 4	6610090	1 1 A	11	*((^y eah ##))*	/
1 4	6610100	1 1(B	11	^which was ex'tremely !n\ice of him# -	/
1 4	6610110	1 2 B	12	^but [[:] - he !d\oesn't 'want to 'do [dh] ^y\ou	/

M

NEUTRAL FEEDBACK

* *TONE*:1,3

**POSITION*: Supporting

110	29	2260	1 1 b	20	roses - -	/
110	30	2270	1 1 A	11	^\oh# -	/
110	30	2280	1 1 A	11	^\[m]#	/
110	30	2290	1 2 b	20	again and again and again except I just did escort	/
110	30	2290	1 1 b	20	yesterday	/
110	30	2300	1 1 A	11	^\[m]#	/
110	30	2310	1 1 b	20	((do you)) see what I mean	/
110	30	2320	1 1 A	11	^\[m]#	/

M

EMPHATIC FEEDBACK

* TONE: 2, 5 (4)

* POSITION: *Supporting*

110	42	3200	1 1 A	11	it's ^called a "!\b\itumen# .	/
110	42	3210	2 2 b	20	that's all right [m] that's fair enough -- but not	/
110	42	3210	2 1 b	20	much	/
110	42	3220	1 1(A)	11	*^th\at sort of thing##*	/
110	42	3210	1 1(b)	20	*grammar have they*	/
110	42	3230	1 1 A	11	^[/m]# .	/
110	42	3240	1 1 b	20	not much grammar.	/
110	42	3250	1 1 A	11	^no#	/

OH

NEUTRAL FEEDBACK

* TONE: 0, 3

* POSITION: *Turn-constructural*

1 4	7411400	1 1 A	11	*^no##* - - -	/
1 4	7411410	1 2 A	11	^so I pre!sume it 'is for :any'body in the :faculty	/
1 4	7411410	1 1 A	11	of !\arts# .	/
1 4	7411420	1 1 A	11	^even if I 'haven` t . been !\asked#	/
1 4	7411430	1 1 A	11	^I could !g\o#	/
1 4	7411440	1 2 B	12	^oh it's [?] it's " ^definitely a :uni`versal	/
1 4	7411440	1 1 B	12	'faculty of : \arts th/ing#	/
1 4	7411450	1 1 B	11	you ^must have 'had a c\opy of it#	/

OH

EMPHATIC FEEDBACK

* TONE: 0, 1, 5

* POSITION: *Turn-constructural*

1 6	103	9450	1 2 A	11	-* - - I'm ^not quite 'sure what he was . trying	/
1 6	103	9450	1 1 A	11	**to** . pr\ove with th/em#	/
1 6	104	9460	1 1 A	11	^when he` d !\finished#	/
1 6	104	9470	1 1 A	20	(*.* - - laughs)	/
1 6	104	9480	1 1 B	20	*(- laughs)*	/
1 6	104	9490	1 1 A	11	^!\oh#	/
1 6	104	9500	1 1 A	22	what a ^t\err**ible ((and he was ^only)**	/
1 6	104	9510	1 1 B	11	**((^!\interesting 'point##**	/

AH

NEUTRAL FEEDBACK

* TONE: 0, 1

* POSITION: *Turn-constructural*

14	13	1840	1	1(A)	11	_s\ession#;*-;	/
14	13	1860	1	1 A	11	^added* to 'which#	/
14	13	1870	2	1 A	21	the	/
14	13	1880	1	1 B	11	*^qu\ite {\^y\es#}##*	/
14	13	1870	1	1(A)	11	un^c\ertainty ((syll 'syll syll s/yll *1 syll#))*	/
14	13	1890	1	1 B	21	*((ah* ^there he :\is **6 sylls))*	/
14	13	1900	1	1(A)	11	**^and 'then !\also##*	/
14	13	1910	1	1 A	11	[@] ((this)) [?] ^wanting to !see _the . !th\ing#	/

AH

EMPHATIC FEEDBACK

* TONE: 5

* POSITION: Turn-constructual

14	9	1240	1	1 A	11	^w\ell#	/
14	9	1250	1	1 A	11	^{/I don't} kn/ow# -	/
14	9	1260	1	1 B	11	^is there any m/ilk# - .	/
14	9	1270	1	2 A	11	((yeah ^there's)) this "!\this [@] "!\p\owder((ed))	/
14	9	1270	1	1 A	11	'milk#	/
14	9	1280	1	1 B	11	^!\ah 'yes# -	/
14	9	1290	1	1 B	11	what does that ^do in t\ea#	/
14	9	1300	1	1 B	11	does ^that diss\olve in 'tea#	/

MHM

NEUTRAL FEEDBACK

* TONE: 0, 1

* POSITION: Supporting

15	21	3180	1	1 C	11	^and 'he said look it's !s\illy#	/
15	21	3190	1	1 C	11	to ^sit and pre!\end you're w/orking#	/
15	21	3200	1	1 C	11	so ^go !h\ome#	/
15	21	3210	1	1 C	11	^I'll 'cover **\up for** you#	/
15	21	3220	1	1 B	11	**^d/id you##*	/
15	21	3230	1	1 A	11	^!\mhm)# .	/
15	21	3240	1	1 C	11	((he)) said if ^any'body r/ings#	/
15	21	3250	1	2 C	11	I'll say you're ^too 'busy to *'come to the	/

MHM

EMPHATIC FEEDBACK

* TONE: 2

* POSITION: Supporting

15	19	2890	1	1 A	11	well "^\m\ost of them {\^s=eem#}##	/
15	19	2900	1	1 A	11	to come ^floating 'in on :S/aturdays#	/
15	19	2910	1	1 A	21	because ^this - *((!one 'week'end I've))*	/
15	19	2920	1	2 C	11	*((well 1 syll)) ^I 'quite* enjoy 'working on	/

1 5 19 2920 1 1 C 11 :S=aturdays# - /
 1 5 19 2930 1 1 A 11 ^[/mhm]# - - /
 1 5 20 2940 1 1 B 11 ((well)) ^I 'always \used to# /
 1 5 20 2950 1 1 B 11 *((when I was ^still at)) :C\ambridge# /

AHA

NEUTRAL FEEDBACK

* *TONE: 1*

* *POSITION: Supporting*

1 2 1 10 1 1 A 11 1it went off ^very very !sm\oothly# /
 1 2 1 20 2 1 A 21 1*((at))* /
 1 2 1 30 1 1 B 11 1*^ah\va#* /
 1 2 1 20 1 1(A) 11 1that ^meeting of the executive com:m\ittee# /
 1 2 1 40 1 1 A 11 1((3 to 4 sylls)) *-.* and I ^r\ang you# *-.* /

AHA

EMPHATIC FEEDBACK

* *TONE: 2*

* *POSITION: Supporting*

1 2 22 3550 1 2 A 11 1^well there have been a !couple of - [@] /
 1 2 22 3550 1 1 A 11 1in:choative - [@: @] but a!bortive c/all# - /
 1 2 23 3560 1 1 A 11 1[@:m] . ^from !P\eterborough# . /
 1 2 23 3570 1 1 A 11 1^to my !h\ome# . /
 1 2 23 3580 2 1 A 21 1*.* [@:] /
 1 2 23 3590 1 1 B 11 1*^ah\va#* /
 1 2 23 3580 1 1(A) 11 1^p\ersonal _calls# /
 1 2 23 3600 1 2 A 12 1^where [dh@i dhi] the [g] the ^operator said :oh /

YEP

NEUTRAL FEEDBACK

* *TONE: 1*

* *POSITION: Supporting*

1 2 11 1720 1 1 A 11 1*((that we'll)) ^carry \on#;-.*; /
 1 2 11 1730 1 1 B 11 1*((we're ^going to)) carry \on# . /
 1 2 11 1740 1 1 B 11 1^y\ep#* /
 1 2 12 1750 1 1(A) 11 1^you s/ee# *-.* /
 1 2 12 1760 2 1 A 23 1^and . [@:m] ^that . [w@?uw @: i] /
 1 2 12 1770 1 1 B 11 1*^y\ep#** /
 1 2 12 1760 1 1(A) 13 1^they said it's !very un:f\ortunate# /
 1 2 12 1780 1 1 A 11 1^that . with!in . !two weeks !after th/at# . /

HM

NEUTRAL FEEDBACK* *TONE*: 0, 1, 3* *POSITION*: Supporting

1 2 46 7540 1 1(B 13 1^b\oth in# . /
 1 2 46 7560 1 1 B 11 1 in ^l\iterature# /
 1 2 46 7570 2 1 B 21 1 and ^this is *what* we /
 1 2 46 7580 1 1 A 20 1*(. clears throat)* /
 1 2 46 7570 1 1(B 11 1!m\ean# - - /
 1 2 46 7590 1 1 A 11 1^[\b=m]# /
 1 2 46 7600 1 1 B 20 1(- laughs) /
 1 2 46 7610 1 1 A 11 1^[\b=m]# . /

HM

EMPHATIC FEEDBACK* *TONE*: 4* *POSITION*: Supporting

1 2b 212360 1 1 A 11 3^which . were being re":versed in Am\erica# /
 1 2b 212370 1 2 A 11 3or *where* A^merica was :trying to go /
 1 2b 212370 1 1 A 11 3!Br\itish# *-.* /
 1 2b 212380 2 1 A 21 3((in the)) /
 1 2b 312390 1 1 B 11 3*^[\b=m]#* /
 1 2b 312400 1 1 B 11 3**[m]^\b[m]#** /
 1 2b 312380 1 1(A 11 3((di^rection of the)) . !Br\itish ((_methods#)) /
 1 2b 312410 1 1 A 11 3that ^we are trying to *a:b\andon#* - - /

The the results of the prosodic realisation of the elements can be summarized in the following table:

	NEUTRAL	EMPHATIC	TOTAL
M	593	58	651
OH	10	135	145
AH	14	5	19
AHA	1	0	1
YEAH	126	8	134
YEP	2	0	2
MHM	22	17	39
HM	7	2	9
TOTAL	775	225	1000

The first striking result is that the elements show a consistent distribution in their specialisation, i.e.: in most cases the continuatives in English tend to specialise either

in neutral or in emphatic meanings as presented above. This confirms the need for a probabilistic systemic approach to discourse because it is a fact that the majority of speakers will prefer one common option in each function.

It is also interesting to point out that the majority of the elements, 77.5%, are used to indicate neutral feedback. In fact, a great proportion of the tokens in the corpus, 2%, —including other continuatives apart from interjections— are used for this purpose (Romero Trillo, 1994b). From all the interjections which realise the feedback function, the element “m” (both neutral and emphatic) is the most frequently used -65.1% of the elements. At the other end of the scale, the least used elements are “yep” and “*aha*” with 2 and 1 instances respectively.

With regard to the position of the elements in the conversation, only two continuatives realise the turn-constructive function, “ah, oh,” whereas the others function as supporting elements. A very interesting fact is that there is a unified behaviour of all the elements regardless their neutral or emphatic realisation. Again, the systemic choice seems to be stable in the appearance of the elements in their position in the turn.

6. DESCRIPTION OF THE SPANISH ELEMENTS

In the Spanish corpus there are no realizations of some interjections that appear in English, namely: “m, oh, mhm, hm,” which constitutes an interesting fact that will be discussed below. Therefore, I will concentrate on the description of the elements: “ah, ya, ajá.”

The Spanish corpus which is used as the basis for this paper does not indicate the intonation pattern of the utterances (as far as I know no Spanish corpus does). Therefore, I will substitute this information by the interpretation of the orthographic symbols that accompany the utterances, exclamation, question marks, etc... Therefore, no indication of tones will be included in the description below.

Before starting the analysis, there is an essential difference between interjection in English and Spanish that is worth mentioning: in Spanish, interjections tend to appear in combination with other elements and always in first position, i.e., as turn-constructive units. Therefore, the description will assume this fact and will not mention the position in the turn:

AH

The combination of continuative elements with “Ah” is the following:

- “¡ah bueno!” (“*ah well!*”)⁴
- “¡ah claro!” (“*ah clear!*”)
- “¡ah sí!” (“*ah yes!*”)
- “¡ah qué bien!” (“*ah how good!*”)

The element “ah” appears on its own only once out of the twenty-seven instances where it appears. It is interesting to point out that all the examples of this element (27) are emphatic, and serve a turn constructive purpose. The use of “ah” in Spanish indicates the complete reception and full understanding of a message:

Examples:

(1) “– ¿Prensa y de esto, no pudo usted... Por lo menos hojearla sí?
 – No, no, sí... hay, hay prensa en español.
 – ¡Ah, sí!
 – Allí sí, sí. Y además la mandaban allí a los locales
 (0,160)
 (– *Newspapers and all this, you couldn't...at least have a look at it, yes?*
 – *No, no, yes....there's there's Spanish press*
 – *Ah, yes!*
 – *There, yes, yes. And, besides, they sent it to the places..)*”

(2) “– Y no desprecio al hombre ¿eh? tampoco.
 – No estoy muy de acuerdo.
 – ¿Ah, sí? A ver.
 – Yo creo que hacemos más los hombres que las mujeres
 (11,185)
 (– *And I don't despise the man, ok? either.*
 – *I don't really agree.*
 – *Ah, yes? Let's see*
 – *I think we men do more things than women)*”

(3) “– ¿Y qué recuerdos tiene de él? Me imagino que muchos.
 – ¡Ah, sí, muchos, muchos! Era muy culto y... hablaba poco, extraño..., muy extraño, hijo de cubana, y su padre era... valenciano...
 (15,267)
 (– *And what memories do you have of him? I imagine that many*
 – *Ah, yes, many, many! He was very cultivated and...talked very little, strange..., very strange, son of a Cuban lady and his father was... from Valencia)*”

YA

This element also appears in combination with itself or with other elements. Almost all the instances of “ya” (53 out of 55) realise the neutral emphatic function and also serve as turn-constructive elements.

The combinations of “ya” in the neutral mode are the following:
 – “ya ya” (repeated up to five times...)
 – “sí ya” (yes already)

Examples

(4) “– Sí, en eso sí. Además que los americanos son materialistas en este sentido y hacen bien. Es decir, van a lo positivo.
 – Sí, sí, sí. **ya**, el nombre de la mayoría de los investigadores que se ven en Estados Unidos (8,139)
 (– *Yes, that's true. And also Americans are very materialistic in that respect, and that's good for them. That is, they take the positive side*

– Yes, yes, yes. **Ya**, the name of the majority of researchers you can see in the United States)”

(5) “– Bien vestida, te refieres.

– No, ni mucho menos, que iba bien, que iba bien en el curso ¡contra!

– ¡Ah!... **ya, ya, ya, ya, ya.**

– Tú quieres sacar los pies al gato; ¡ni hablar!

(– *Well dressed, you mean.*

– *Not at all, that she was OK, that she was doing well in her course, OK?*

– *Ah! ...ya, ya, ya, ya, ya.*

– *You want to make things complex, no way!)*”

We also find some exceptional cases in which “ya” functions as feedback on its own:

(6) “– va a ser muy clásico, muy clásico de delimitar la, la, la época, o sea, si, si alguna vez en el futuro esto sale a la luz, ¡je, je!

– **ya.**

– Vienen los extraterrestres y nos comen, ¡je, je!,

(it’s going to be very traditional, very traditional to set the, the, the period, I mean, if it ever comes out in the future, hahaha! -Laughter

– **ya**

– *The aliens come and eat us, hahaha!)*”

The combination of “ya ves” (“you already see”) is the only instance of emphatic “ya”:

(7) “– Y luego, las preguntas de... sobre los rumores y eso.

– ¡**Ya ves!**, ¡**ya ves!** y ¡qué, qué tontería! (21,403)

(and then, the questions about... the gossip and all that.

– ***Ya ves!**, **ya ves!** And, what, what nonsense)*”

AJÁ

This element only appears in the emphatic feedback function. However, it has only five realisations in the whole corpus. In contrast to all the other elements in Spanish, “ajá” always appears by itself as in the following examples:

Examples

(8) “– Entonces yo, lo que pasa, es que soy un apasionado de la narrativa ¿no?

– ¡**ajá!**...

– Y yo en definitiva, mi vocación... primera...ha sido siempre las Letras”

(– *so I, what happens, is that I am enthusiastic with narratives, ok?*

– **Ajá!**...

– *And I... on the whole, my vocation, the first, has always been the Arts)*”

(9) – “que es una cosa que siempre daña a la literatura: el estar excesivamente de moda, ha sido pues ... a los sudamericanos ¿no?

– ... ¡ajá! ...

– Empecé con el... increíble boom de... de García Márquez, con la ... los «Cien años de soledad».

(Which is something that always harms literature: being too fashionable, has been, you know... the South Americans, hasn't it?)

– *ajá!*

– *I began with the ...incredible boom of García Márquez, with the... the “One hundred years of solitude)”*

The results of the Spanish corpus are the following:

	NEUTRAL	EMPHATIC	TOTAL
AH	0	27	27
YA	53	2	55
AJÁ	0	5	5
TOTAL	53	34	87

The first comparison of the results from both corpora indicates that Spanish uses a considerably smaller number of interjections to realise the phatic function: in English 0.02% of the elements of the corpus are interjections in the feedback function, whereas in Spanish the percentage is reduced down to 0.0006%.

Spanish, therefore, does not favour the appearance of this kind of continuatives in the feedback function, and when they appear they tend to do it in combination with other elements. This circumstance is especially significant because the appearance of these elements is highly marked in the ordinary exchange structure —because of their scarcity— and therefore, they are mainly used as turn-constructive items and not as indicators of interactional alignment.

The systemic choice in the use of interjections in Spanish is even more striking than in the case of English. Spanish differentiates between neutral, realised only by the element “ya,” and emphatic, realised mainly by the element “ah” (79.5% of the instances), followed by “ajá” (14.7%) and then by “ya” (5.8%). The conclusion that can be drawn from these data is that Spanish, as well as English, makes a systemic choice in the use of emphatic and neutral interjections in the feedback function.

CONCLUSIONS

The general conclusion is that English makes more use of interjections in the feedback function than Spanish. In other words, Spanish speakers tend to use interjections to start a new turn and not to show the reception of a message or to show their listenership to the addresser. This implies that Spanish does not favour regrammaticalisation in this particular function.

With regard to the function that feedback elements realise in the structure of a conversation it is possible to ascertain the following systemic roles in discourse:

- * they serve to establish interaction and keep the conversation going, and
- * they appear in turn-constructural position as footings for the forthcoming message

In the first case the speaker-hearer distribution is not altered, whereas in the second case the use of feedback enables the speaker to start a new turn.

Feedback interjections in Spanish only realise the second function, the first one is realised uniquely by the continuative “ajá” which represents 0.05% of the instances in the whole corpus.

In other words, feedback interjections in English can be said to be more textual and interpersonal, whereas in Spanish they are more ideational, and respond to meaningful information for the addressee: they play an important role in the transmission and reception of the “new” of the message.

Another important fact is that Spanish seems to have a complete systemic alternation of items for the dichotomy “emphatic-neutral,” whereas English realises the choice not only by alternating items but also by making a difference in terms of intonation. In other words, English presents itself as a more prosody-oriented language (Romero Trillo, 1997), a fact which implies that a given discourse function can be realised by almost anything as long as it appears in the appropriate slot, and with the appropriate intonation. Spanish, on the other hand, depends more on the lexical-grammatical meaning of an element and generally looks for a wider set of grammaticalised elements.

Incidentally, the contrast between “aha-ajá” is very interesting due to their similar phonetic realisations. Even though both elements are very rare in the overall frequency, they are far more common in Spanish: 0.05%, than in English 0.001%. With regard to the function of both elements, in Spanish “ajá” realises the emphatic function whereas in English “aha” realises the neutral function. This divergence can result, and often does, in the occurrence of pragmatic errors when the speaker of either language makes a direct translation of function and frequency when speaking in the other language.

As a final observation, English in general seems to be not so tolerant of silence whereas Spanish conversations may last for a long while without any feedback indication. This contrast is very important to emphasise in any pedagogical approach to the teaching of both languages, since this essential difference may alter the functional expectations of non-native speakers of either language and can therefore, lead to miscommunication.

To sum up, I believe that systemic grammar and its approach to spoken language, especially in the field of intonation, constitutes an essential tool in the description of languages in an elusive area, such as discourse, where it is difficult to establish definite parameters of analysis. It is worth mentioning the pedagogical implications that may result from the extensive contrastive research into the functional characteristics of spoken language.

Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank Ana Llinares for her helpful comments on the final version of this article.
- ² The background research for this article has been funded by the DGES, project no.:PB96-0520.
- ³ In this article I describe continuatives from a grammaticalisation perspective in full detail.
- ⁴ The examples from the corpus will leave the interjections in their original Spanish form because what matters is their function and not their meaning.

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