Introduction: Evidentiality, Epistemicity and Mitigation in Spanish

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Abstract

This volume brings together six articles which explore the connections and relations between the domains of evidentiality, epistemicity and mitigation in Spanish. Works included in this special issue explore the pragmatic effects of deploying evidentials in discourse, such as mitigation of the speaker commitment and evaluation. All studies offer empirical and corpus-driven analysis (including oral and written, informal and formal genres). Some contribute to describing the argumentative functioning of evidential mechanisms in specific genres (Villalba and Kotwica); epistemic and evidential strategies of mitigation (Estellés); and cognitive and affective facets of mitigation (Figueras). Others add to the understanding of the pragmatics of several Spanish language units with evidential and/or epistemic meanings that can be deployed, among others, for mitigating (Albelda; Rodríguez Rosique) or managing knowledge in conversation (Uclés). As a result, this volume contributes to widening the scope of the existing studies on evidentiality, taking into account the complex nature of interconnections between this category and other domains related to the speaker's discursive stance.

Keywords Evidentiality · Epistemicity · Mitigation · Discourse genre · Pragmatic strategies

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Introduction

The contributions collected in the present volume explore the relations, limits, and interactions between three discursive dimensions in Spanish: evidentiality, epistemicity and mitigation. The main assumption in all of the papers included in this special issue is that evidentiality, epistemicity and mitigation are three dynamic domains in communication, interconnected in specific and particular ways according to discursive genres.

Evidentiality has been defined in the linguistic tradition as the coding of the source of information or the mode of knowledge (Aikhenvald 2004; Anderson 1986; Chafe and Nichols 1986; Squartini 2001; Willett 1988). Originally, the focus of attention of linguists was the pure grammaticalized systems of languages in which there is a compulsory marking of the sources of information (e.g. Aikhenvald 2004; Anderson 1986; Wierzbicka 1994; Willett 1988). This rather narrow view of evidentiality has been expanded recently to include languages without grammatical evidentials. As a result, many specialists have come to regard evidentiality as a discursive-pragmatic phenomenon (Boye 2010; Briz 2016; Cornillie 2016; Diewald and Smirnova 2010; Estellés 2018; Figueras 2018a, c; Fox 2001; Hill and Irvine 1993; Izquierdo 2016; Kotwica 2013, 2017, 2019; Mushin 2000, 2001), rather than a formal-linguistic category (Aikhenvald 2004; De Haan 1999, 2001, 2005). Within an interdisciplinary framework¹ and focusing on the socio-cultural and interactional aspects of evidentiality, investigation is now oriented toward the understanding of the mechanisms and strategies deployed to construe and evaluate the source of information in discourse. In the realm of Spanish, this line of research on evidentials has been developed in the recent compilations by Albelda (2015), Albelda and Estellés (2018), Cornillie and Izquierdo (2017), Figueras and Cabedo (2018) and González Ruiz et al. (2016).

Consistent with this transition from studying pure grammaticalized systems toward considering the functional-discursive nature of evidentiality, there has been an increasing interest in exploring the interfaces between evidentiality and other neighboring semantic and pragmatic domains, such as epistemicity. Besides the largely disputed issue of the boundaries, or lack thereof, between evidentiality and epistemic modality (cf. Dendale and Tasmowski 2001),² one particular aspect that is currently being explored in the literature is the contribution of evidentials to the task of managing knowledge in interaction. Evidentials inform about how speakers construct the source of information, but they also imply an assessment of the relationship between the speaker and the source. Therefore, the consideration of the

¹ This wider concept of evidentiality is the result of the contributions from a range of different disciplines in which the phenomenon has been examined: discourse analysis (Chafe 1986; Givón 1982, 1989; Hill and Irvine 1993; Pomerantz 1984), psycholinguistics (Aksu-Koç and Slobin 1986; Kamio 1994, 1997), and linguistic anthropology (Fox 2001; Hill and Irvine 1993).

² Following Boye (2012: 2–3), the conceptual domain of epistemicity comprises two subcategories: evidentiality and epistemic modality. Evidentiality includes ‘epistemic justification’ (understood as ‘source of information’, ‘evidence’ or ‘justification’), whereas epistemic modality equals ‘epistemic support’ (involving notions such as ‘degree of certainty’ and ‘degree of commitment’).

pragmatic and interactive nature of evidentiality requires not only tackling what the source of information is, but also what kind of attitude the speaker displays regarding the reliability and validity of the source, as well as towards the epistemic status of the information.

The speaker's epistemic positioning is in close relation with the relative authority and differential rights and responsibilities regarding the information that is put forward in interaction. Communicators are routinely in the business of managing their relative epistemic rights for demonstrating knowledge about the states of affairs in the world. To do so, they resort to certain practices indexed in their talk (Heritage 2002, 2011; Heritage and Raymond 2005; Raymond and Heritage 2006; Sidnell 2012; Stivers 2005; Stivers et al. 2011). These asymmetries in displaying knowledge during social interaction can be studied in conjunction with the deployment of evidentials. Likewise, the subsequent tensions between the interactants when dealing with issues of agreement/disagreement and affiliation/disaffiliation can be examined within a model of mitigation. From this approach, it follows that a fluid and natural connection between evidentiality and other discursive strategies, such as mitigation, is routinely established through the articulation of epistemic evaluations in individual texts.

Mitigation constitutes a communicative strategy designed by the speaker to convey distance in relation to the message (Briz 2003, 2006; Briz and Albelda 2013; Caffi 1999, 2007). With mitigation, the illocutive force of the speech acts and the role of the participants are minimized, whether to reach an intended agreement or to reduce conflict (Briz 2006). From a linguistic perspective, mitigation has been regularly regarded as a pragmatic category (Albelda and Briz 2019; Albelda et al. 2014; Albelda and Cestero 2011; Briz 2007, 2011; Briz and Albelda 2013; Caffi 2007; Cestero and Albelda 2012; Schneider 2007, 2013; Thaler 2012), often contingent on the notion of face and facework (Albelda 2016a, 2018; Bravo 2002; Figueras 2018b; Hernández Flores 2013). As pragmatic phenomena, mitigation and evidentiality often interact in discourse. One instance of this interplay takes place when the speaker construes his/her epistemic positioning towards certain information. Thus, *shields* (Caffi 1999), which are linguistic mechanisms to depersonalize the statements made, may also be used as evidential markers to express that the speaker is not the source of the information and that he/she is avoiding any personal responsibility for the content conveyed (Albelda 2016b).

Against this backdrop, the six contributions of this special issue aim to uncover the semantic and pragmatic extensions of the linguistic meaning that are the result of the intersection of evidentiality with two other categories: epistemicity and mitigation. The questions addressed by the authors are the following:

1. What are the interrelations between the semantic domains of evidentiality and epistemicity?
2. How does mitigation connect with either evidentiality or epistemicity in Spanish?
3. What are the specificities of the relationship between evidentiality, epistemicity and mitigation according to different discursive genres?

Each paper sheds light on a particular pragmatic aspect that has not been contemplated in former studies of evidentiality in Spanish; namely, the role of genre in modulating the evidential, epistemic and mitigating meaning, the relation between evidentiality and argumentation, and between epistemicity and mitigation, the role of expressing empathy (mindreading) or providing reasons (argumentation) in mitigation, or the parameter of intersubjectivity as a mediator between evidentiality, mitigation and genre. On a more general note, the individual chapters seek to enhance our knowledge of the different aspects and dimensions of evidentiality, epistemicity and mitigation in actual discourse.

Some contributions delve into the conditions in which evidential, epistemic and mitigating expressions are teamed up for complex discourse operations, such as construing argumentation, or monitoring epistemic asymmetries in interaction. Thus, Villalba and Kotwica examine the argumentative functioning of evidential expressions in judicial discourse. Through an extensive quantitative–qualitative analysis of a transcribed corpus of Spanish trials, the authors identify reported evidentiality and generic inference as the most common types of evidentiality in this genre. In addition, their research reveals a direct association between the type of evidentiality and the role of the speaker in the trial, in the sense that visual evidence was typically presented by the non-expert participants in the trial (for example, the witnesses), whereas generic inferences were predominantly used by the specialists (such as lawyers). The authors conclude that a strong relationship between the expression of evidentiality and the discourse genre “trial” in Spanish can be established. The genre conventions related to the roles of the participants constrain the types of evidentiality deployed in Spanish oral trials. What is more, those participants who master the ‘rules’ or the genre conventions will likely be the ones who are most successful in using them during the proceedings to make their case.

Taking a different perspective, Figueras explores the cognitive and affective dimensions of mitigation in discourse. Her study focuses on the discursive articulation of the mental operations of mindreading, argumentation and empathy when providing advice in an online forum for recovery from eating disorders (EDs). Examining a corpus of 45 threads (559 posts and 104,578 words), the author shows how the linguistic behavior exhibited by participants when interacting in that forum constitutes, in fact, the external manifestation or discursive expression of the copying mitigation mechanisms to confront the stressor of providing advice in a highly charged emotional environment. Figueras concludes that in the context of an ED recovery forum, mitigation emerges not only as a pro-social verbal activity to protect face, but to protect life. In order to effectively offer assistance to other sufferers, responsible advisors struggle with the challenge of providing well-thought, sound advice to a very vulnerable recipient. This kind of critical advice requires a battery of complex mental and emotional abilities (mindreading, reasoning-argumentation, empathy) aimed to challenge the advisee’s system of beliefs, and to persuade him/her to follow the recommended course of action. Discourse mitigation in that context is, therefore, built on social cognition abilities.

The particularities of evidentiality and epistemicity in parliamentary debates are featured in the study by Estellés. The author traces the diachrony of discursive changes in the Spanish parliamentary debates through the evolution of the pragmatic

meanings associated with the evidential discourse markers *al parecer* and *por lo visto* ('apparently'). The analysis of the corpus of Spanish parliamentary debates from 1979 to 2018 reveals that the use of evidential markers has decreased over the years, and that they have also evolved to convey more negative pragmatic contents. Estellés concludes that the default pragmatic function of *por lo visto* in this political genre is criticism, and that the preferred modes of knowing associated with this marker are non-firsthand and generic evidence. *Por lo visto* is used in formal and colloquial registers and, hence, could be regarded as the unmarked member regarding register. *Al parecer*, instead, is less marked, both in semantics and in distribution, when deployed in more formal genres. The evolution in frequency and semantic specialization of these two evidential discourse markers can be linked to the evolution of parliamentary debates in Spain. According to the author, these changes reflect a new purpose of the Spanish parliamentary exchanges: during the first legislature, when Spain regained democracy, the legislative activity was paramount. As time passed, the political agendas went to the front line of the parliamentary activity and discrediting the political adversary in order to gain the electorate progressively became the main goal of the debate.

Focusing on individual discourse particles, Uclés' contribution is concerned with the role that these units play in producing mitigation and management of knowledge in conversation. Her analysis uncovers the epistemic primacy of *¿no?* in relation to mitigation across three different oral genres: colloquial conversations, interviews and monologues from YouTube. The author explores how mitigation and knowledge (a)symmetries are intertwined in these three discourse genres. The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the corpus yield significant differences in the distribution of the absolute values of *¿no?* and its mitigating values across genres. These differences might be caused by the type of sequences characteristic of each genre. Uclés identifies five different knowledge configurations and shows how mitigation appears to promote certain epistemic configurations, whereas non-mitigating data seem to be favoring other epistemic figures. Considering the relations between mitigation and epistemic (a)symmetries, Uclés shows that *¿no?* is commonly deployed in epistemic configurations in which the speaker has epistemic primacy. In those cases, *¿no?* tends to carry a non-mitigating value. In configurations in which the interlocutor has epistemic primacy (or the speaker is not claiming epistemic rights), a mitigation value is more likely to be associated with this particle.

On the specific topic of the interface between evidentiality and mitigation, some of the contributions contemplate the complex ways in which the original evidential content of certain linguistic expressions has been communicatively adapted to convey mitigation in discourse. On that account, Rodríguez Rosique explains the behavior of *aunque sea* ('at least'), observing its progression from a scalar particle indicating information status toward its discursive use as an attenuation particle. The author argues that *aunque sea* has become an argumentative operator that reinforces the speech act performed with the utterance when it appears through mitigation. This explanation, apparently a contradiction, is based on the hypothesis that *aunque sea* is a case of grammaticalization. Semantically, *aunque sea* represents an example of (inter)subjectification: the addressee is included in the meaning of the construction (Traugott 2010). Syntactically, it illustrates the phenomenon of cooption,

by which some elements with a function in the sentence grammar come to operate in the discourse level. *Aunque sea* reduces the illocutionary force of the speech act while, at the same time, minimizes the addressee's responsibilities. The expression presents the speech act as a minimum that the addressee cannot possibly reject. That way, *aunque sea* becomes a persuasive strategy in communication.

Relatedly, the focus of Albelda is to discuss the semantic and pragmatic values of the Spanish evidential construction *se ve (que)* ('apparently, seemingly') in order to uncover the mitigation contents triggered by this expression. Through an extensive study of conversations from the corpus Ameresco (*American Colloquial Spanish*) and the corpus PRESEEA (*Project for the Sociolinguistic Study of Spanish from Spain and America*), Albelda analyses all the evidential occurrences of *se ve (que)* in face-to-face interactions. Adopting the framework laid out by Cornillie and Delbecque (2008), the author applies the categories of speaker commitment and speaker involvement to account for the mitigating function of *se ve (que)* in certain contexts. The results of her analysis indicate that two paths seem to work in opposite directions when considering the content of the evidential subtypes of *se ve (que)*: (1) one path goes from reportative evidence to conjectural inferentials (Squartini 2008), revealing that there is a scale of lesser to greater speaker involvement; (2) another path, accounting only for the inferentials, is built on a scale of greater to lesser speaker commitment, and goes from circumstantials to conjecturals. In the light of these results, Albelda concludes that there seems to be a lack of uniformity in the mitigating content of *se ve (que)*. Consequently, with this particular expression, the mitigating meaning is pragmatic, and not semantic in nature.

All in all, these six papers can be grouped in two main categories: the studies dedicated to explore the interplay between evidentiality, epistemicity and mitigation in particular discursive genres, seeking to determine the idiosyncratic pragmatic nuances triggered by each genre when incorporating any of these three dynamic domains of meaning in interaction (Estellés; Figueras; Villalba and Kotwica; Uclés); and the contributions that focus on special evidential markers in Spanish and their connection with mitigation (Albelda; Rodríguez Rosique). Both focal interests are explored in at least six different discourse genres and typologies: oral trials (Villalba and Kotwica), parliamentary debates (Estellés), interviews (Uclés), colloquial conversations (Albelda; Uclés), YouTube videos (Uclés), and online forums (Figueras). These text types and genres represent a relevant sample of the wide range of discourses produced in different areas of public and private life.

All the contributions are empirical, corpus-driven, and eclectic as to the methods and the theoretical frameworks adopted. The studies apply quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis of the data. Some authors have compiled their own corpus (Estellés; Figueras; Villalba and Kotwica), whereas others have resorted to a publicly available corpus of reference, such as the Val.Es.Co oral corpus (Uclés). For the contributions dedicated to specific evidential markers used as mitigation devices, the phenomena are thoroughly investigated within the CREA (Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual); the CORPES (Corpus del Español del Siglo XXI; *Spanish corpus of the XXI century*) [Rodríguez Rosique];

the Ameresco corpus; and the PRESEEA corpus (Albelda). This wide range of materials allows the researchers to analyze a wealth of data, which results in novel and original findings on the combinations and the evolution of evidential, epistemic and mitigation meanings associated with certain linguistic forms in actual discourse.

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