A lo mejor and *igual*. Epistemic and non epistemic meanings

María José Barrios Sabador
[1] Nebrija University, Madrid, Spain
mjbarrio@nebrija.es

Abstract

This paper looks into the use of *a lo mejor* and *igual* ('maybe', 'perhaps') in oral texts of the *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* where the speaker doesn't show any lack of commitment to the proposition. In some of these texts, the speaker gives an example to substantiate his position; in others, he talks about everyday actions – characterized by showing an effective state of affairs and, as such, not subject to doubt –. To account for these uses – not described in grammar – we provide some explanatory hypotheses based on the primary meaning of these exponents, their stage of grammaticalization and their pragmatic motivation.

1 Introduction

This study focuses in the use of *a lo mejor* and *igual* (both of them express 'perhaps' or 'maybe') in Spanish conversation in a way that is not restricted to the modal qualification of uncertainty of a proposition, as no lack of knowledge is invoked. This phenomenon requires a pragmatic approach concerned with unraveling the discourse functions of these two probability markers. In this respect, the dyadic nature of conversation has to be underlined, "as meanings are created jointly by speaker and hearer" (Coates 1990: 53). Modal markers play a very important role in this task, as they are used by speakers "to encode their point of view towards what is being talked about" (Coates 1990: 59). This communicative purpose will allow us to give a proper account of the use of *a lo mejor* and *igual* in their interactional dimension. A common feature of modal markers is their evolution "from a purely qualificational function toward textual and rhetorical functions" (Cornillie and Pietrandrea 2012: 2112).

It should be pointed out that theoretical reflections and corpus-based analyses about the interactional function of modal and evidential markers are not new, since such a role has already been recognized in spoken language (Holmes 1984; Coates 1990; Finegan 1995; Kärkkäinen 2003; Verhagen 2006; Simon-Vandenbergen and Aijmer 2007 or Cornillie and Gras Manzano 2015, among other scholars). The interactional aspects of modal markers have been also a main concern in the literature on speech act theory (Searle 1969, 1975), as well as on politeness theory (Brown and

Levinson 1987; Haverkate 1986, 1994; Briz 2002) and studies on mitigation (Fraser 1975, 1980; Holmes 1984; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2004, among many others), where much attention has been paid to the expression of uncertainty as a resource of attenuation both in written and spoken language. Mitigation strategies involve the speaker and the addressee, this revealing their intrinsically interactional nature. Yet, in the paragraphs under examination here *a lo mejor* and *igual* don't necessarily convey the mitigation of the assertoric force of the statement, a peculiar behavior that raises the question about their function in these texts, all of them belonging to face-to-face conversations. Whereas the semantic meaning can be epistemic modal or evidential in nature, the pragmatic meaning refers to a subjective or intersubjective dimension (Cabedo Nebot and Cornillie 2011). Modals have been traditionally seen as subjective devices, insofar as they show the epistemic attitude of the speaker toward his proposition. Their intersubjective function arises from their use "to reduce the force of utterances and thus protect both speaker's and addressee's face where the topic is sensitive" (Coates 1987: 127). Notwithstanding, certainty adverbs tend to be used "to suggest shared access to evidence and hence a common point of view" (Simon-Vandenbergen and Aijmer 2007: 35). It is not unreasonable to say that this applies just as much to uncertainty adverbs, as it is studied below.

2 *A lo mejor* and *igual*. Some basic characteristics

The starting point for this paper is to be found within a larger study which focuses on the properties of epistemic modal markers in their semantic, syntactic and pragmatic aspects, both in the field of native speakers and second-language learning (Barrios Sabador 2012). The linguistic expression of *probability*, a concept that can be described as the *expression of an oriented uncertainty*, shows a wide range of elements in Spanish. Such elements stand as "warning" signs of the degree of commitment assumed by the speaker about his proposition.

All these markers share some basic properties, one of them being members of a scale ranging from absolute certainty to complete uncertainty. Based on Zadeh's (1965) and Lakoff's (1973) tenets, probability markers can be characterized basically according to their fuzzy edges and vague boundaries. They are semantically and pragmatically entailed in a hierarchical relationship where the selection of a stronger form like *probable* means that a weaker one such as *possible* is implicated, but not the other way round. Following Horn (2006: 21), modal markers can be accounted – due to their scalar value – as "lower-bounded by their literal meaning and upper-bounded by quantity-based implicature". This behavior means that the assertion of a weak scalar value implicates the negation of stronger values in the same domain" (Horn 2006: 23). Therefore, the use of *a lo mejor* or *igual* to describe or evaluate some state of affairs implies that *possibly* (let alone *probably*) doesn't hold. Another property of these elements is their *procedural* condition, this without denying their *conceptual* meaning. In the field of Relevance Theory, borrowing Wilson and Sperber's words (2012: 165), probability markers can be treated as both non-truth-conditional and conceptual in that they are "constituents not of the proposition expressed but of higher-level explicatures".[1] It should be added that this attribute does not exclude their procedural condition, since they work – using Blakemore's definition of procedural meaning – encoding "PROCEDURES, or the means for increasing the salience of a particular kind of inferential computation." (Blakemore 2000: 476).[2]

Within the framework of Langacker's idealized cognitive models, specifically within the dynamic evolutionary model, epistemic modals can place the designated process in a **projected reality** (this

---

[1] The authors use these terms to refer to sentence adverbials, including illocutionary adverbs such as 'seriously' or 'frankly'. In spite of the unquestionable differences between these adverbials and probability markers, we found this characterization fully applicable to the latter.

[2] Small capitals as added by Blakemore (2000: 476).

would be the case for *seguro que* 'certainly') or in a **potential reality** (*quizás, puede que, a lo mejor* or *igual*, all of them expressing 'maybe' or 'perhaps'). In this latter case, the speaker situates the process in a conception of reality where nothing "is seen as barring it from evolving along a path leading to the occurrence of that process (there is no insurmountable energy barrier to overcome)." (Langacker 1991b: 278). With regard to the semantic value of these exponents, and following Langacker's theory of **subjectification** and **perspective** (1990, 1991a), probability markers can be categorized as expressions that leave the conceptualizer out of the predication, since the predication itself constitutes the focused entity, which implies a subjective role of the conceptualizer and an objective construal of the scene.

3 *Mejor* and *igual*. From adverbs to modal markers

With regard to *a lo mejor* and *igual*, both of them express a weak commitment to the likelihood of the reported state of affairs and do not witness mood alternation, as they determine the use of indicative. These markers are **grammaticalized** forms, which is evidenced by the fact that they cannot change depending on number. As for *a lo mejor*, neither the preposition nor the article allow variation. Both operators have undergone **semantic change** (they do not refer to comparative values anymore) as a result of which they have acquired a fuzzy, diffuse meaning (already vague due to their **deictic** nature) and have become more discourse-based or "speaker-based", referring not to the "real world" but to the "world of discourse", all of them common features of semantic change (Heine and Hünnemeyer 1991, ap. Hopper 1996: 225). Bearing in mind these characteristics, I will try to give a brief account of the evolution in their meaning. It should be noted that the explanations outlined here are of purely hypothetical nature, but they might expound, to some extent, the evolution of these words towards the acquisition of an uncertainty value. In addition, they may help us understand their function discussed here, closer to that of a discourse marker. It should be pointed out that the data found in the review of digitized dictionaries of the Real Academia Española should be interpreted with caution, since they lean on the consultation of a single source. On the other hand, we can't disregard the normative condition of these data, which might not necessarily correspond with the real use of *igual* and *a lo mejor*. In other words, the modal use of these expressions was probably common in spoken language prior to their incorporation into these academic dictionaries.

A common feature of most probability markers, noticeable when consulting Spanish Royal Academy's dictionaries (henceforth *DRAE*) from 1737-1739, is the high number of definitions used to describe their meaning. This extensive range of significant nuances, coupled with their inherent vagueness, may have facilitated their semantic depletion. In the case of markers such as *a lo mejor*, *igual* and *lo mismo*, their indexical condition, combined with their fuzzy meaning, may have been a decisive factor in their grammaticalization and desemanticization.

As for *igual*, six definitions were found in the *DRAE* of 1734, the first of which ("What alignes and agrees on another thing in quantity, quality, weight or dimensions. It comes from Latin *aequalis, e*, which means 'the same.'") is preceded by the characterization "relative term", a note that illustrates its indexical meaning (*DRAE* 1734: 208). It is not until 1899 that the meaning of "indifferent" is found, followed by the example *Todo le es igual* "He doesn't care about anything" (*DRAE* 1899: 545). The first dictionary that includes a modal meaning is the *DRAE* of 1992: "Adverb of doubt, informal. Maybe. It may rain tomorrow." (*DRAE* 1992: 805). A definition that can be traced back to 1734 and remains constant – with slight variations in its phrasing – is "in the same way", "similarly". The term *igual*, used in this sense in contexts when all events mentioned are regarded as equally likely to happen or be true, may have increasingly acquired contextual connotations when referring to something, without it being relevant whether it takes place or is true. In epistemic terms, this meaning would be associated to a low degree of certainty about the propositional content.

Concerning *a lo mejor*, in 1734, along with the definition "What is superior and exceeds another thing in any natural quality", we find the sentence *Mejor te ayude* Dios "May God help you", followed by this explanation: "Sentence used to response and to mean that what has been said is uncertain or is intended to be harmful" (*DRAE* 1734: 531). In 1869 *a lo mejor* is defined as a "Familiar sentence which states an unexpected fact or saying, usually infamous or unpleasant", a meaning that clashes with the semantics of the adverb. This meaning of "contingency" has remained constant since then, whereas the negative component stays unchanged until 1984, where we can read "Familiar adverbial phrase meaning uncertainty or possibility. Maybe the reason was different. Maybe I leave in the dawn." (*DRAE* 1984: 893). We may venture that the meaning of "uncertain", present in *Mejor te ayude Dios*, could have persisted over time and might have been attached to the phrase *a lo mejor*. Nonetheless, this is merely speculation – based on the examination of these dictionaries – which goes beyond the aim of this paper and requires further research.

4 Hypotheses

According to theoretical grammar of Spanish language, *a lo mejor* and *igual* are described as "adverbs of doubt" (*Nueva Gramática de la Lengua Española* 2009: 1771, 2351), and that is their most usual meaning in the corpus investigated (Barrios Sabador 2012). Our first approach to the *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* (henceforth *CREA*) aimed at offering a thorough description of the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic functions of probability markers, *a lo mejor* and *igual* among them. It was expected a probability use of these exponents, sometimes as mitigating devices to avoid potential disagreement or to protect the speaker's self-image, as it has been pointed out in politeness theory and studies on mitigation. However, our search yielded some results of these markers introducing narratives where the speaker recounts past or present habitual actions and, as such, first-hand experiences. In other contexts, *a lo mejor* (the research for cases on *igual* did not yield any results) is heading an example used with an illustrative or an argumentative intention and it can be fully paraphrased as *por ejemplo* 'for example'.

In view of these results, it is my intention to test three hypotheses in this article: (1) These markers may have a subjective and intersubjective function in contexts of exemplification. It is expected that the data will display some occurrences where subjective uses are interwoven with intersubjective ones; (2) Examples were potentially brought up in conversation meeting two different communicative needs: either the objectification of an idea difficult to explain or the presentation of well-argued evidence in order to issue a substantiated opinion; (3) Narratives about habitual actions should be more speaker-oriented and therefore would show a subjective use of *a lo mejor* and *igual*, paraphrasable in these contexts by *normalmente* 'usually' or *por ejemplo* 'for example' as well, meaning here the exemplification of a habitual action. In order to check these hypotheses, special attention is given to phenomena such as the presence of deixis, generalizations, discourse markers, other modal exponents, cognitive verbs and causality constructions. Therefore, semantics and pragmatics go hand in hand with the discursive analysis of the paragraphs of *a lo mejor* and *igual* examined here. The main objective of this study will be to elucidate the context that permits in these markers a non modal meaning which is not recorded in dictionaries so far.

5 Methodology

My study is corpus-based. I have chosen the *CREA* since it offers a great amount of information in computerized form with a variety of spoken genres, in long paragraphs that allow a thorough analysis of the context of probability markers. The average length of the paragraphs is 13 – 15 lines (217 – 256

words approximately). Due to the large number of texts found in the query results, our search scope was limited to Spanish territory. We examined these probability markers in talk-in-interaction, in order to check their real use and compare it with theoretical accounts given by traditional grammar.

To meet this objective, 1531 paragraphs of *a lo mejor* and 1451 of *igual* were analyzed. After reviewing all these texts, 1273 paragraphs of *igual* were discarded, since they illustrated a comparative use of this item (adjectival or adverbial), which left 178 texts of *igual* as a modal marker. Further analysis showed 14 texts where the adverb did not convey epistemic modality. As for *a lo mejor*, 194 paragraphs were not included as modal occurrences, which means a 12.67% of the total amount (1531 texts). These unexpected results lead us to hypothesize that these markers, used in face-to-face interaction, should be explained by their interactional purpose, continuing in the line of the previous studies carried out by De Cock 2015, Cornillie and Gras Manzano 2015, Cabedo Nebot and Cornillie 2011 and Cornillie 2010, among others. For the purpose of accounting for the use of *a lo mejor* and *igual* in this interactional dimension, all the paragraphs were checked in order to study the co-occurrence of this adverbial phrase with other modal markers, cognitive verbs (*creo, pienso* 'I think'), different kinds of argumentation markers (*sin embargo* 'however', *pero* 'but', *porque* 'because', *por eso* 'so/ that's why'…) and metadiscursive markers (*es decir* 'that is', *mira* 'look', *vamos* 'come on'/ 'anyway' – depending of the sentence –, *claro* 'of course', *bueno* 'well', etc.).[3] It was also analyzed the use of (1) deictic forms (personal pronouns among them), (2) impersonal constructions, as they can express subjectivity or intersubjectivity depending on the construction and the consideration to the addresser or addresse's attitudes (De Cock 2015), and (3) generalizations, since they "evaluate and strengthen stance" and are used "to create intersubjective ties both by generalizing experience and attitude and by ratifying others' point of view while mutually adhering to societal discourses" (Scheibman 2007: 118). Given the argumentative purpose of many paragraphs with *a lo mejor*, special attention was paid to the presence of clauses belonging to the semantic field of causality: conditional, concessive, adversative and causal clauses. The answer to these research questions will lead me to analyze in depth the contextual properties of *a lo mejor* meaning 'for example', *a lo mejor* and *igual*[4] meaning 'usually' and, eventually, elucidate their interactional role in conversation, a factor which can explain their non modal meaning.

6 Quantitative approach to corpus data

As stated above, *a lo mejor* is found in 163 paragraphs where is heading an example whether with an illustrative or argumentative purpose, with no detectable modal meaning. There are also 131 paragraphs where the speaker uses *a lo mejor* when telling whether a past or a present habit, with no modal meaning either. As for *igual*, there are 14 paragraphs where it doesn't encode a modal value, all of them concerning narrations of common activities related to past or present experiences. For the sake of simplicity, I will henceforth refer to 'example use(s)' and 'habitual action use(s)'.

There is a higher presence of causality constructions and argumentative markers in 'example uses' of *a lo mejor*, quite significant in conditional sentences, compared to 'habitual action uses' of *a lo mejor* and *igual*. What is more, these causality constructions are more common in contexts where *a lo mejor* doesn't involve epistemic modality (Barrios Sabador 2012), as the Table 1 shows. This pattern is consistent with the argumentative purpose of the example, being less frequent where the example has an illustrative role. With regard to *igual,* the comparison of results is less conclusive, a fact that is

---

[3] This is not a rigorous classification. There is a vast array of categories and denominations that fall outside the scope of this paper. For a more detailed description, see Martín Zorraquino and Portolés Lázaro (1999), Vigara Tauste (1992), as well as Briz, Pons and Portolés (2008).

[4] It should be pointed out that *igual* allows an "example reading" in some paragraphs of "habitual actions", with an exclusive illustrative – not argumentative – purpose.

compounded by the small size of the sample (14 occurrences where *igual* doesn't express uncertainty). For the sake of pertinence, I have only considered these phenomena as long as they are related to the sentence with *a lo mejor* (the turn which hosts the marker). That is to say, not all the cases of *pero* 'but', *como* 'as/since' or *si* 'if', for instance, have been registered. As for causality constructions, only those which *a lo mejor* and *igual* appear in have been taken into account. The table below presents a fairly high proportion of causal clauses in sentences with *a lo mejor* when giving an example. In these cases, the causal clause justifies a weak assertion (the sentence where *a lo mejor* appears in) and could be interpreted as a face-saving strategy, by which the speaker assess his reliability and accuracy, which points to a subjective use.[5]

	A lo mejor. EX (N= 163)	*A lo mejor.* HA (N= 131)	*A lo mejor.* PROBAB (N= 1337))	*Igual.* HA (N= 14)	*Igual.* PROBAB (N= 164)
Conditional sentences	20 (12.3%)	8 (6%)	70 (5.2%)	1 (7%)	6 (3.7%)
Causal sentences	34 (26%)	28 (21%)	250 (18.7%)	3 (21%)	32 (19.5%)
Concessive and adversative sentences	22 (25.8%)	20 (16%)	185 (13.8%)	1 (7%)	(18) 11%

Table 1: Presence of *a lo mejor* and igual in causality sentences

	A lo mejor. EX (N= 163)	*A lo mejor.* HA (N= 131)	*Igual.* HA (N= 14)
pero	124	51	11
porque	134	56	13
que	14	8	2
pues	78	49	13
es que	83	17	2
lo que pasa es que	5	6	0
como	6	5	1
entonces	44	25	50
por eso	15	4	0

Table 2: Most common markers with a subjective orientation in the context of *a lo mejor* and *igual*

Another phenomena which reflect the speaker's need for appearing trustworthy and reliable would be the high proportion of adversative, causal and consecutive clauses surrounding the sentence where *a lo mejor* and *igual* appear in (Table 2). These devices may be seen as indicators of subjectivity, as they account for the speaker's attitudes.[6] As for other markers (such *es decir*, *por ejemplo* 'for example', etc., in Table 3),[7] their use would be motivated on the same grounds: to give explanations

---

[5] In the tables of this paper, *EX* stands for *example*; *HA*, for *habitual action*; *PROB* for *probability*.

[6] The translation of these markers could be the following: *pero* 'but', *porque* and *que* 'because', *pues* 'well'/ 'as'/ 'so' (depending on its context), *es que* and *lo que pasa es que* 'it's just that'/ 'the thing is', *como* 'as'/ 'since', *entonce*s, 'so', *por eso* 'that's why'.

[7] The translation of these markers (it is approximate in those belonging to a colloquial register) could be the following: *la verdad es que* 'the truth is', *o sea* and *es decir* 'that is to say', *digamos* 'let's say', *ya te/le dig*o 'I know'/ 'I'm telling you', *digo*

based on common sense and shared experiences, which is a sign of the subjective and, at the same time, intersubjective value of *a lo mejor* and *igual*. Therefore, in line with Cornillie (2010), they could be conceived as "a discourse strategy of the speaker to achieve alignment with the co-participant." (Cornillie 2010: 321).

	A lo mejor. EX (N= 163)	*A lo mejor*. HA (N= 131)	*Igual*. HA (N= 14)
o sea	93	26	12
la verdad (es que)	10	9	0
es decir	10	2	0
digamos	18	1	0
ya te digo/ digo yo	4	0	1
digo yo	1	3	0
por ejemplo	87	8	1
quiero decir	2	6	12
no sé	40	9	4
yo qué sé	27	13	1

Table 3. Most common markers with a subjective-intersubjective orientation in the context of *a lo mejor* and *igual*

A subjective orientation is seen in the use of cognitive verbs, which reflect the speaker's attitudes, as "these are the propositions where the addresser is profiled as a speaking and thinking subject." (De Cock 2015: 19). [8] Cognitive verbs have been studied as semantic-pragmatic devices through which the speaker doesn't assert the propositional content. This attitude could be conceived as an effective strategy enabling the speaker to lessen the illocutive force of his utterance when expressing an opinion, as it has been echoed in many studies from the field of pragmatics and politeness. The same purpose holds for the presence of epistemic modal markers in the context of *a lo mejor*. The distribution of cases evidences a striking difference between probability (Barrios Sabador 2012) and non probability uses, with a higher frequency of cognitive verbs and modal markers in the latter cases. Given the argumentative and/ or illustrative use of *a lo mejor* and *igual* in contexts where no probability is expressed, this frequency would be a clear signal of seeking the adressee's approval (intersubjective function), showing simultaneously a subjective orientation (the speaker's point of view). Contrasts between probability and non probability uses are set out in Figure 1.
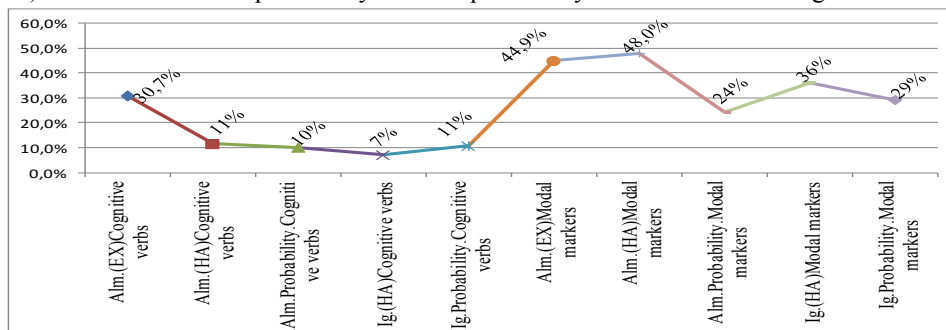

Figure 1: Modal markers and cognitive verbs in paragraphs of *a lo mejor* and *igual* . Probability and non probability uses

---

yo 'in my opinion'/'I think so anyway', *por ejemplo* 'for example', *quiero decir* 'I mean', *no sé* 'I don't know' and *yo qué sé* 'I don't know'/ 'whatever'.

[8] 'Alm.' and 'Ig.' stand for *a lo mejor* and *igual,* respectively. (HA) stands for "habitual actions" and (EX), for "example". It should be recalled that the search of *igual* meaning "for example" didn't return any results.

Other markers have mainly interactional features and as such, are hearer-oriented: *bueno* 'well', *vamos* 'come on'/ 'anyway', *mira* 'look', *claro* 'of course', *¿no?* 'don't you think so?'/'isn't that so?' and *¿sabes?* 'do you know?' are the most common.

	A lo mejor. EX (N= 163)	*A lo mejor*. HA (N= 131)	*Igual*. HA (N= 14)
bueno	73	35	2
mira	9	23	3
vamos	55	12	2
claro	38	12	4
¿no?	86	23	3
¿sabes?	7	9	2

Table 4: Most common markers with an intersubjective orientation in the context of *a lo mejor* and *igual*

The differences are quite noticeable in *bueno*, *vamos*, *claro* and *¿no?*, given their higher frequency in the 'example uses' of *a lo mejor*. By contrast, *mira* is more common in contexts where the speaker talks about past or present habits. This fact would be associated with the argumentative movement or the illustrative clarification (reformulation, rectification, confirmation, all of them seeking hearer's endorsement) and the need to keep hearer's attention, respectively. Anyway, the cases of *mira* are not, on the whole, particularly striking.

A salient feature of the contexts of *a lo mejor* and *igual* is the presence of generalizations, impersonal constructions, the second person pronoun *tú* 'you' and the indefinite pronoun *alguien* 'somebody'. Generalizations are far more frequent in 'example uses', as shown in Figure 2.
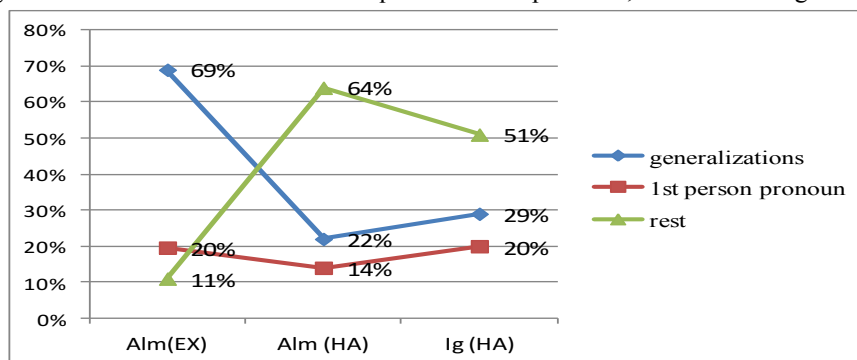

Figure 2: Generalizations and speaker's positioning in paragraphs of *a lo mejor (Alm)* and *igual (Ig)*

All these devices should be seen as different strategies used for epistemic, subjective and intersubjective stancetaking. Concerning generalizations, they can be defined as expressions that "designate types – as opposed to tokens – of people, things, attitudes, reactions, activities and relations" (Scheibman 2007: 111). Regarding *tú,* its use means neither absolute indeterminacy nor direct reference to the speaker, and should be seen as a generic indicator rather than an impersonal reference (Hidalgo Navarro 1996: 172). These strategies help to blur the line between the speaker and his message, in different contexts and for different purposes, as discussed below.[9]

---

[9] With *él* 'he' in Figure 2 – I refer to the presence of a subject that designates a category such as a 'teacher', a 'beggar', a 'friend' and so on. *Ellos* is translated by 'they'; *nosotros* by 'we', *gente* and *personas* mean 'people' and *se* is a 3rd person pronoun that can be used as a mark of impersonality.

	A lo mejor. EX (N= 112/163)	*A lo mejor*. HA (N= 29/131)	*Igual*. HA (N= 4/14)
tú	44%	12%	0%
ellos	12.5%	4%	25%
él (category)	10.7%	0%	0%
nosotros	9.8%	10%	100%
gente	7.1%	28%	75%
alguien	5.4%	3%	50%
se	4.5%	3%	0%
impersonal sentences	3.6%	0%	0%
personas	2.7%	0%	25%

Table 5. Generalizations and speaker positioning in paragraphs of *a lo mejor (Alm)* and *igual (Ig)*

Generalizations and generic references are much more frequent in the case of 'example uses' (112 paragraphs out of 163) than in the context of habitual actions (29 paragraphs out of 131). Obviously, this fact has to be related to the characteristics of the texts under examination: argumentative moves would need to invoke examples, that is, something representative of a thought, an idea and hence prone to be used in a generic manner. Conversely, habits are acquired behavior patterns and, as such, the subject of the sentence and the speaker are often coreferential.

7 Qualitative analysis and discussion

7.1 *A lo mejor* as *for example*

A lo mejor conveys, in its epistemic use, a low commitment to the truth of the state of affairs described. A low degree of likelihood is consistent with the *potentiality* (not *probability*) of the event exemplified and proposed to clarify the stance of the speaker. In other words, 'event feasibility' means that its occurrence is not precluded in the normal course of events, and therefore could potentially take place. *A lo mejor* (as well as the rest of probability markers, *igual* among them) is a mental space builder (Fauconnier 1985, 2007). In the cases here reviewed, and borrowing Fauconnier's words, *a lo mejor* builts up an "example space", activated for an illustrative or argumentative purpose, linked to the discourse base space at some point, being both connected to each other by identity and analogy mappings. As already noted, *a lo mejor* can be paraphrased as *for example* in the paragraphs under discussion. *For example* is described as an adverbial phrase used when giving an example in order to prove, illustrate or authorize what has been said previously (*DRAE*). It is classified as an "argumentative indicator" (and more specifically, as a "concreteness marker") by Martín Zorraquino and Portolés Lázaro (1999: 4082, 4142).

Given its procedural condition, and within the framework of the procedural-conceptual distinction, it could be said that the use of *a lo mejor* may be conceivable as "systematically linked to states of language users" (Wilson 2016: 11). As it has been noted by Wilson (2011: 23), indicators of epistemic modality and evidentiality may be connected to epistemic vigilance mechanisms, "geared to assessing the reliability, honesty and trustworthiness of the speaker". Interestingly, this significant feature points at their interactional role in dialogue and their intersubjective effect in the paragraphs under examination, where the speaker gives examples which are usually not drawn from lived experience, but reproduce situations or events which could occur in everyday life. The chief aim of the speaker consists either in demonstrating the validity of his reasoning or in illustrating the point he's trying to convey.

When *a lo mejor* is used in the argumentative move, its context shows a high frequency of generalizations, subjectively oriented markers, as well as cognitive verbs and modal exponents, all of them used to justify the speaker's point. Generalizations in the conversations reviewed in this study have the same characteristics that the ones described by Scheibman (2007), inasmuch as they are "based on personal and social expectations and beliefs, and the use and interpretation of these utterances is keenly sensitive to interactive contexts." (Scheibman 2007: 111-112). These elements are at the same time subjective (they reflect speakers' attitudes) and hearer-oriented (they are intended to obtain addressees' support and respect for the speakers' opinions). Hence their intersubjective purpose of attenuating the speaker's declarations. Therefore, it's not surprising their presence in the context of *a lo mejor*. In fact, it should be stressed the highest number of generalizations (Table 5) and the presence of cognitive verbs and modal markers when probability is not involved, as noted above (Figure 1). Nevertheless, it should be pointed that in 'example cases', *pensar* shows a high percentage of use – *(yo) pienso* [54%], *(yo) creo* [34%] – in stark contrast with the occurrences where *a lo mejor* has a modal value – *(yo) pienso* [16.7%], *(yo) creo* [57.9%] – (Barrios Sabador 2012). This is in line with the higher strength of the argumentative move (*pensar* conveys more commitment to the truth of the proposition than *creer*) compared to the declaration of uncertainty. The use of the personal pronoun *yo* with *pienso* is recurrent in 'example uses' (75. 6%), a phenomenon that can be considered as a emphatic projection of the speaker, who adds "weigh to his/her point" (Kapellidi 2007: 116).[10]

Concerning the second person pronoun, their occurrence is pervasive when giving an example with an argumentative purpose. As Hidalgo Navarro (1996) points out, the pronominal second person in spoken language may be a syncretic index that allows the reference to the interlocutor as well as to an indeterminate subject (Hidalgo Navarro 1996: 166). All these phenomena are exemplified in the paragraph below and shown in bold. Note also the presence of *por ejemplo* 'for example' and the use of *a lo mejor* to exemplify the speaker's point (peer group influence in alcohol consumption), which would indicate a grammatical role more in keeping with that of a discourse marker.

(1) Paraghaph 737. *A lo mejor* (fragment)[11]
*Pues **yo yo pienso** igual que tú, pero es que, además, creo que es eso, que la gente arrastra mucho a otras personas, y, **por ejemplo**, como ha dicho Andrés, pues si, **por ejemplo**, él se lo planteó, pero es eso, que están todos sus amigos y, o se lo plantea todo el mundo, o, si no, no se puede, **¿no? Porque** estás tú ahí, y **igual** lo intentas, pero tus amigos **se supone** que se lo pasan bien así, y **entonces** tú estás como fuera de lugar, y eso, **pues**, no te ayuda. **Pero es que**, **por ejemplo**, **yo pienso** que los amigos influyen muchísimo. Si tú vas con amigos que no beben, tú no bebes **porque**, simplemente, tus amigos no lo hacen. Igual que, ¿por qué empieza la gente a drogarse?, **porque**, **a lo mejor**, llega el amigo: tal, que yo probé en tal sitio no sé qué, venga probarlo, y eso incita, y **parece** como el que no lo hace es menos machito, o lo que sea, ¿no? **O sea**, que los amigos influyen mucho y es eso, pues.*

Well I **think** so too, but I also **think** it's that, that people win others over, and, **for example**, as Andrew has said, yes, **for example**, he considered it, but it is that, all his friends are there and, or everyone considers it, or, if not, it's not possible, **right? Because** you're there, and **maybe** you try, but your friends **are supposed** to have a good time in this way, and **then** you are out of place, and that, then, doesn't help you. **But**, **for example**, I **think** friends influence a lot. If you go with friends who don't drink, you don't drink **because**, quite simply, your friends do not. It's just like, why people start taking drugs ?, **because**, **maybe**, their friend comes: so, I tried there do not know what, come and try

---

[10] Depending on the context, this strategy could also serve as a mitigating device, softening the assertoric force of the speaker's declaration.

[11] It should be recalled the orality of the texts here analyzed. At all time I have faithfully respected the original transcription. The word in red shows the probability marker studied in the paragraph. For reasons of space, the content of each paragraph has been reduced in this paper.

it, and that incites, and **it seems like** the one who doesn't do it is less of a tough guy, or whatever, **right? That is**, that friends influence a lot and that is that, then.[12]

Subjectivity prevails when the speaker sets himself up as the example which embodies the point at issue, cases which involve also face-work:

(2) Paraghaph 737. *A lo mejor* **(fragment)**
*Pero, **sin embargo**, ahora ya, que se llega a un estado más de madurez, pues ya se pueden hablar ciertas cosas y se pueden Cuando ya tienes. Claro Tratar ciertos temas que antes pues, no, **porque** a mí, **a lo mejor**, **a los dieciséis años mis padres no me van a decir**: oye, ¿tú eres virgen? o: con la tía esta, con la que estás saliendo, ¿haces algo, haces cositas?, y ahora, **a lo mejor**, pues **sí que me lo pregunta**.*

But nevertheless, now, you reach a state of maturity, because you can already speak about certain things and you can When you already have. Of course You can deal with certain topics that previously well, no, **because** me, **maybe**, **when I was sixteen, my parents are not going to ask me**: Hey, are you a virgin? or: with this girl, with whom you're dating, do you do something, do little things?, and now, **maybe**, yes, **she does ask me**.

Some features in this paragraph merit further consideration. It should be mentioned that the speaker chooses the present tense to talk about past times. By virtue of this change, the reported dialogue is placed onstage and can be taken as conclusive on speaker's argumentative needs, adding a timeless validity as well. It should be noted the factuality of the propositional content (and, as such, not subject to doubt) following *a lo mejor* ("she does ask me"). This modal marker would meet the needs both of giving an example and, simultaneously, mitigating the force of the proposition. In this particular instance, the presence of the modal marker might point the speaker's feeling of uneasiness concerning the topic of conversation.

Next paragraph is also indicative of the use of *a lo mejor* as *for example*. Here, however, no argumentative purpose is pursued, as the speaker tries to give some examples of the kinds of things his husband brings to their children. Following Sperber and Wilson (2015: 126), this could be considered as a kind of special "deixis" which helps the speaker to get her message across. These examples would be used "because no perspicuous verbal description is available". Non-specific mentions (marked in bold) are very common in such contexts of *a lo mejor*. In this paragraph, an additional 'habitual action reading' is also present.

(3) Paraghaph 1045. *A lo mejor* **(fragment)**
*Claro. Sí, sí. están muy acostumbrados los niños que todas las semanas, cuando viene el padre bueno, alguna semana a lo mejor no le da tiempo y no les compra **algo**, pero como él pare Siempre algo. como él pare en algún sitio en la carretera, a tomarse una cerveza, y haya **lo que sea** Sí. **cosas de niños** o **algo**, no debe no te preocupes que a sus hijos siempre les trae **algo**. Claro. Siempre les ha traído un al niño **a lo mejor** una grúa, a la niña **esto**, un llavero **Lo que sea**, **cualquier** detalle. un bolígrafo, o un reloj, un boli o sea un reloj de bolígrafo, que **a lo mejor** ha echado en la maquinita y le ha dado un reloj. Sí, **cosas así**. **Cualquier** detallito siempre le les trae.*

Of course. Yes, yes. My children are very used to, every week, when their father comes home, well, maybe there is a week when he doesn't have the time to and he doesn't buy **anything**, but if he stops, if he stops at a roadside bar, to have a beer, and there is **whatever** Yes. **Kids stuff** or **something**, he

---
[12] It should be noted the high amount of discourse markers serving interactional purposes.

shouldn't don't worry, he always brings **something** to his children. Of course. He always has brought **maybe** a toy crane to his boy, that, a key ring to his girl. **Whatever**, **any** gift, a pen, or a watch, a pen, that is a pen-watch, because **maybe** he played slot machines and he got a watch. Yes, **things like that**. He always brings **any** gift to them.

7.2   *A lo mejor* and *igual* in the narration of habitual actions

When the speaker talks about habitual actions, the contexts of use of these markers have generally the same properties of 'example uses' seen above, though they are dissimilar in quantity (differences are shown in the tables and figures above). Therefore, for the sake of brevity, and with a view to avoiding unnecessary repetitions, I'll give some examples of this 'habitual action use' and I will restrict myself to focusing on the procedural meaning of these markers, in order to give an approximate explanation of their role in these factual contexts, where people talk about their everyday life in the past or the present.

(4) Paraghaph 1226. *Igual* **(fragment)**
*Si no sé si el polvo entraba por todos los sitios. Había tanta puertas o había tantas cosas. Claro claro que había más polvo porque. Porque estaba distinto Alcalá. Porque yo recuerdo que en mi casa **igual** antes se manchaba más. Ahora está la plazoleta limpia no si era **pero** no se mancha tanto. **Entonces** Mi me mi marido cuando mi marido **todos los días** me echa a mí la bronca. **A lo mejor mira**, el otro día estaba sentado y estaba así en la lámpara, soplando, y digo: "¿Qué soplas qué soplas, cacho tonto?"*

If I don't know if dust entered through any place. There were so many doors or there were so many things. Of course, of course that there was a lot of dirt because. **Because** Alcalá was different. **Because** I remember that at home **maybe** everything was dirtier. Now the square is clean **but** nothing is so dirty. **Then** My me my husband when my husband scolds me **every day**. **Maybe**, **look**, the other day he was sitting and he was like that at the lamp, blowing away [dust from the lamp], and I say: What are you blowing away what are you blowing away, you silly?

Words indicating past actions or situations appear in boldface. Discursive markers and intersubjective elements as *mira* are also highlighted. It should be noted that the imperfect tense is used in Spanish to refer to past habits and situations. In these contexts, the speaker usually makes a contrast between past and present, with the intention to show how things have changed. Thus, the use of *a lo mejor* and *igual* could also meet the explanatory purpose found in the 'example paragraphs'. As for the use of these exponents with the present tense in narrations, they could be translated as 'for example' or 'usually', depending on the context they appear in.

(5) Paraghaph 895. *A lo mejor* **(fragment)**
*debido al trabajo de mi padre, que tiene que estar mucho tiempo fuera, entonces, pasamos sí, **los fines de semana** casi siempre los pasamos juntos, **¿no?, pero ya te digo** que somos muy independientes, y entre semana pues nos vemos, **a lo mejor**, a la hora de la comida y no más, **o sea**, por la mañana yo estoy fuera, luego, **digamos que** yo por la noche me voy fuera también, mi hermana, igual, o sea, más que nada **en las comidas**, **o sea**, durante la semana, no, pero **los fines de semana**, cuando mi padre no está fuera, sí, sí que pasamos tiempo.*

due to my father's work, he has to be away from home often, then we spent yes, we spent almost **every weekend** together, **right?, but I'm telling you** that we are very independent, and on weekdays we meet, **maybe**, at lunchtime and no more, **that is**, in the mornings I'm off, then, **let's say** that me at night I go out too, my sister, just like me, that is, mostly **at lunchtime**, **that is**, during the week, we

don't [see each other], but **on weekends**, when my father is not away from home, yes, we do spend time [together].

8 Conclusions

In these paper I have tried to show that *a lo mejor* and *igual* are used in a way that is not restricted to the expression of epistemic modality. Their presence in conversational Spanish reveals an interactional function previously attested in corpus-based studies (Cornillie 2010; Cabedo Nebot and Cornillie 2011; Cornillie and Gras Manzano 2015; DeCock 2015). These interactional properties have proven very useful in the explanation of semantic meanings that are not yet recorded by dictionaries and show the need of analysis that look at modal markers in their textual dimension. Only our awareness of the use of modal markers in context and, more than that, in everyday Spanish conversation can alert us to functions and meanings which may otherwise go unnoticed. By focussing beyond the sentence level and drawing attention to phenomena surrounding *a lo mejor* and *igual,* I have been able to make a tentative approach for explaining a meaning that should be seen as one of pragmatic nature. This non modal meaning might be accounted for as discourse motivated and would respond to semantic-pragmatic tendencies proposed by Traugott (1989), whereby meanings based in the external situation come to have a textual meaning and "become increasingly situated in the speaker's subjective belief state or attitude toward the proposition." (Traugott 1989: 31). The uses of *a lo mejor* meaning *for example* (whether for argumentative aim or for setting the speaker's point) and *a lo mejor* and *igual* as *for example* or *sometimes* when talking about habits would convincingly illustrate their progressive semantic bleaching and their shift to discourse markers. This situation would show the principle of *divergence,* which "means that the grammaticalization of a form does not entail the disappearance of its lexical uses; rather, the grammaticalized form and its lexical counterpart may coexist" (Hopper 1996: 230). In the present case of *a lo mejor* and *igual*, the new meaning (*for example*) would coexist with their widespread function of modal markers, this latter use being prevalent.

The new meanings require, as said before, discourse context for their proper identification. In 'example uses', the context of *a lo mejor* shows a high proportion of argumentative markers and markers of alterity (as referred to by Martín Zorraquino and Portolés Lázaro 1999). The former help the speaker to give his arguments a strong foundation, by making a chain of reasoning linking his point to evidence provided by common sense or lived experience. The latter have rhetorical functions, more specifically, interactional purposes, seeking addressee's confirmation and trying to attract his attention and they are quite common when *a lo mejor* and *igual* are found in narrations of habits. As Traugott (2003: 128) puts it, "intersubjectivity involves SP/W's attention to AD/R as a participant in the speech event, not in the described situation."[13] Therefore, subjectivity and intersubjectivity are often interwoven in the oral texts under examination. With regard to generalizations, they reveal subjective and intersubjective purposes, as they "are used by participants to evaluate, demonstrate solidarity with one another, and authorize opinions." (Scheibman 2007: 112). Cognitive verbs and other modal markers would represent speaker point of view in the argumentative move, hence bearing subjective attitudes. Despite being quite common in 'example uses', they are more frequent when *a lo mejor* encodes a modal meaning of uncertainty (Barrios Sabador 2012).

'Example uses' would go a step further in epistemic terms: as a modal marker, *a lo mejor* expresses a low degree of likelihood that the propositional content may be real. As a discourse marker, it would show no commitment with the event expressed, as long as the propositional content has been brought up for the purpose of illustrating what the speaker means (this role also performed by *a lo mejor* and *igual* in 'habitual action uses') or with a view to persuade the hearer. Such

---

[13] SP/W stands for speaker/writer; AD/R, for addressee/reader.

interactional purposes raise new questions concerning the grammatical status of these modal markers, considering their occasional presence in conditional clauses, something traditionally deemed impossible in studies about truth-conditional content of some linguistic phenomena. Therefore, further research is required in order to give account of the prosodic configuration of these adverbs, as well as their semantic and syntactic distribution, topics which couldn't be addressed within the limits of this paper.

In sum, this alternative approach of *a lo mejor* and *igual* – in line with previous studies on interactional properties of modal and evidential markers – may provide for a better understanding of their interactional use in informal spoken language.

References

Barrios Sabador, M.J. (2012). *La expresión de la probabilidad en el español nativo y no nativo. Una aproximación descriptiva, gramatical y pragmática.* Ph.D. dissertation. Madrid: Nebrija University.

Blakemore, C. (2000). "Indicators and procedures: *nevertheless* and *but", J. Linguistics* 36, 463-486.

Briz. A. (2002). "La estrategia atenuadora en la conversación cotidiana española". En D. Bravo (Ed.), *Actas del Primer Coloquio del Programa EDICE* (pp. 17-46). Estocolmo: Programa EDICE.

Briz, A., Pons, S. y J. Portolés (coords.) (2008): *Diccionario de partículas discursivas del español.* Published on line at www.dpde.es

Brown, P. y Levinson, S.C. (1987). *Politeness: some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cabedo Nebot, A. and Cornillie, B. (2011). "On the prosody of subjective and intersubjective modal adverbs in Spanish". Paper presented at the *12th International Pragmatics Association Conference* (IPrA). Manchester, 3- 8 July 2011.

Coates, J. (1987). "Epistemic modality and spoken discourse". *Transactions of the Philological Society,* 85 (1), 110-131.

Coates, J. (1990). "Modal meaning: the semantic pragmatic interface", *Journal of Semantics* 7, 53-63.

Cornillie, B. (2010). "An interactional approach to epistemic and evidential adverbs in Spanish conversation". In G. Diewald and E. Smirnova (eds.), *Linguistic Realization of Evidentiality in European Languages of Cognitive Linguistics,* 309 – 330. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Cornillie, B., Pietrandrea, P. (2012). "Modality at Work: Cognitive, Interactional and Textual Functions of Modal Markers". *Journal of Pragmatics,* 44, 2109-2115.

Cornillie, B., Gras Manzano, P. (2015). "On the interactional dimension of evidentials: The case of the Spanish evidential discourse markers". *Discourse Studies,* 17, 2, 141-161.

De Cock, B. (2015). "Subjectivity, intersubjectivity and non-subjectivity across spoken language genres". *Spanish in Context,* 12, 1, 10-34.

De Smet, H. and Verstraete, J.C. (2006). "Coming to terms with subjectivity". *Cognitive Linguistics,* 17 (3), 365-392.

Fauconnier, G. (1985/ 1994). Mental *Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language*. Cambridge: University Press.

Fauconnier, G. (2007). "Mental Spaces". In D. Geeraerts y H. Cuyckens (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics,* 351-376. Oxford: University Press.

Finegan, E. (1995). "Subjectivity and subjectivisation: an introduction". In D. Stein and S. Wright (eds.), *Subjectivity and subjectivisation. Linguistic perspectives,* (pp.1-13). Oxford: University Press.

Fraser, B. (1975). "Hedged performatives". In P. Cole y J. L. Morgan (eds.), Syntax *and Semantics*, 3, (pp.187-211). Nueva York: Academic Press.

Fraser, B. (1980). "Conversational mitigation". *Journal of Pragmatics*, 4, 341-350.

Haverkate, H. (1986). "Estructuras argumentativas en el español hablado". *Actas del VIII Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas*, 1, 22-27 de agosto de 1983, 1, (pp. 685-691).

Haverkate, H. (1994). *La cortesía verbal: estudio pragmalingüístico*. Madrid: Gredos.

Hidalgo Navarro, A. (1996). "Sobre los mecanismos de impersonalización en la conversación coloquial: el tú impersonal". *ELUA,* 11, 163-176.

Holmes, J. (1984). "Modifying illocutionary force". *Journal of Pragmatics*, 8, 345-365.

Hopper, P.J. (1996). "Some recent trends in grammaticalization". *Annual Review or Anthropology,* 25, 217-236.

Horn, L. R. (2006). "The border wars: a neo–Gricean perspective". In K. von Heusinger and K. Turner (eds.), *Where Semantics meets Pragmatics,* 21-48. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Elsevier.

Kapellidi, C. (2007). "The Speaking Subject in Communication: 'Subjectivity' and the (Gendered) Self". *CamLing,* 112-119.

Kärkkäinen, E. (1992). "Modality as a Strategy in Interaction: Epistemic Modality in the Language of Native and Non-Native Speakers of Englihs". *Pragmatics and Language Learning,* 3, 197-216.

Kerbrat – Orecchioni, C. (2004). "¿Es universal la cortesía?" In A. Briz and D. Bravo (Eds.), *Pragmática sociocultural: estudios sobre el discurso de cortesía en español*, (pp. 39-53). Barcelona: Ariel Lingüística.

Lakoff, G. (1973). "Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts*". Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 2 (4), 458-508.

Langacker, R. W. (1990). "Subjectification". *Cognitive Linguistics*, 1 (1), 5-38.

Langacker, R. W. (1991a/ 2002). *Concept, Image, and Symbol. The Cognitive Basis of Grammar.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Langacker, R. W. (1991b). *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. II. Descriptive Application*. California: Stanford University Press.

Martín Zorraquino, M.A. and Portolés Lázaro, J. (1999). "Los marcadores del discurso". In I. Bosque and V. Demonte (eds.), *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española,* 3, 4051- 4213. Madrid: Espasa.

Real Academia Española. *Nuevo tesoro lexicográfico.* Retrieved from http://www.rae.es/recursos/diccionarios/diccionarios-anteriores-1726-1992/nuevo-tesoro-lexicografico

Real Academia Española. (2008). *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual (CREA)*. Retrieved from http://www.rae.es/recursos/banco-de-datos/crea

Real Academia Española. (2009). *Nueva gramática de la lengua española*. Madrid: Espasa Libros.

Scheibman, J. (2007). Subjective and intersubjective uses of generalizations in English conversations", in R. Englebretson (ed.), *Stancetaking in discourse: subjectivity, evaluation, interaction,* 111-137. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Searle, J.R. (1969/1994). *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language.* Cambridge University Press.

Searle, J.R. (1975). "A classification of illocutionary acts", *Language in Society,* 5, 1-23. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language.* Cambridge University Press.

Simon-Vandenbergen, A. M., Aijmer, Karin. (2007). *The Semantic Field of Modal Certainty. A Corpus-Based Study of English Adverbs.* Berlin/ New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. (2015). "Beyond Speaker's Meaning". *Croatian Journal of Philosophy,* 15 (44). 117 – 149.

Traugott, E.C. (1989). "On the rise of epistemic meanings in English: an example of subjectification in language change". *Language,* 65, 31-55.

Traugott, E.C. (2003/ 2004). "From subjectification to intersubjectification". In R. Hickey (ed.), *Motives for Language Change*, 124 – 139. Cambridge: University Press.

Verhagen, A. (2006). "On subjectivity and 'long distance *Wh*-movement'". In A. Athanasiadou, C. Canakis and B. Cornillie (eds.), Subjectification. Various Paths to Subjectivity, 323 – 346. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Vigara Tauste, A. M. (1992/2005). *Morfosintaxis del español coloquial.* Madrid: Gredos

Wilson, D. (2011). "The conceptual-procedural distinction: Past, present and future". In V. Escandell-Vidal, M. Leonetti and A. Ahern (eds.), *Procedural Meaning: Problems and Perspectives,* 3 – 31. Emerald: Bingley.

Wilson, D. and Sperber, D. (2012). *Meaning and Relevance.* Cambridge: University Press.

Wilson, D. (2016). "Reassessing the conceptual-procedural distinction". *To appear in Lingua* 2016. Published on line at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2015.12.005

Zadeh, L.A. (1975). "Fuzzy Logic and Approximate Reasoning". *Synthese*, 30 (3/4), 407 – 428.