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**A Few Notes on Conversational Patterns in European Castilian**

## Abstract

14 Spaniards speaking Castilian as their mother tongue have been asked on typical Castilian patterns for some conversational situations. The results show they choose address pronouns rather, though not exclusively on the basis of how frequently they meet an interlocutor. The most typical small talk topic is the weather. Taboo topics are salary and other money issues. When Castilian speakers want to give their opinion, they first say their opinion, then they give reasons related to the issue. Offers are meant literal. When Castilians want to turn an offer, they use a vague excuse like “No, I don’t have time.” or “No, I have something else to do.” or a phrase like “(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know”, though they will surely not contact the person again. In order to express disagreement, they use phrases like “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...” and “(No), I disagree / (No), I have a different opinion.”. To show that they want to end a conversation, they use phrases of the types “I have to go now, I have something else to do”, “It’s already late now” or “I don’t want to bother you any longer” or they invent a reason. In general, Castilians prefer mostly direct, bald on-record strategies. The Gricean maxims of quality and manner turn out to be especially salient. A “pragmatic stage direction” for conversations in European Castilian could be: “Avoid hurting the other, but say what you mean as directly and clearly as you can.”

## Sommaire

14 Espagnols de langue maternelle castillane ont été demandés quels modèles typiques il y avait pour certaines situations de conversation. Les résultats montrent que le choix des pronoms d’adresse dépend plutôt, même si pas entièrement, du fait s’ils voient leur interlocuteur régulièrement ou non. Le sujet de Small Talk le plus typique est le temps. Les sujets tabous sont le salaire et d’autres questions d’argent. Si les parleurs du castillan veulent donner leur opinion, ils la donnent d’abord et puis des raisons qui vont avec. Les offres sont à prendre littéralement. Quand les Castillans veulent décliner une offre, ils recourent à une excuse vague comme «Non, je n’ai pas le temps.» ou «Non, j’ai autre chose à faire» ou à une phrase «(Je ne sais pas encore) Je vous encore répondrai», même s’ils sont certains de ne plus contacter l’autre personne. Pour exprimer du désaccord, ils utilisent des phrases telles que «Oui, je vois ce que vous voulez dire, mais je pense que...» et «(Non), je ne suis pas d’accord / (Non), j’ai une autre opinion». S’ils veulent terminer une conversation, ils se servent d’expressions du type «Il faut que j’y aille, j’ai autre chose à faire», «Il est déjà tard» ou «Je ne veux pas vous ennuyer plus» ou ils inventent n’importe quoi pour expliquer pourquoi ils sont obligés de s’en aller maintenant. En général, les Castillans préfèrent, la plupart du temps, des stratégies directes. Les maximes griciennes de la qualité et de la manière se montrent spécialement saillantes. Une «didascalie pragmatique» pour des conversations en castillan: «Évitez de faire du mal aux autres tout en disant ce que vous pensez vraiment - aussi directement et aussi tôt que possible.»

## Zusammenfassung

14 Spanier kastilischer Muttersprache wurden zu typischen kastilischen Gesprächsmustern in einigen Situationen befragt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Anredepronomen eher, wenn auch nicht gänzlich, davon abhängen, wie oft man einen Gesprächspartner sieht. Das typischste Small-Talk-Thema ist das Wetter. Tabuthemen sind das Gehalt und andere Geldthemen. Wenn Kastilischsprecher ihre Meinung sagen wollen, sagen sie diese zunächst und führen dann damit zusammenhängende Gründe an. Angebote sind wörtlich zu verstehen. Wenn sie ein Angebot ablehnen wollen, verwenden Kastilischsprecher eine vage Entschuldigung wie “Nein, ich habe keine Zeit” oder “Nein, ich habe anderes zu tun” oder ein Wendung wie “(Ich weiß noch nicht). Ich geb dir noch Bescheid”, obwohl sie sicher sind, dass sie sich nicht mehr melden werden. Um auszudrücken, dass sie anderer Meinung sind, verwenden sie Phrasen wie “Ja, ich sehe, was Du meinst, aber ich denke...” und “(Nein), ich bin nicht einverstanden / (Nein), ich bin anderer Meinung”. Wenn sie ein Gespräch beenden wollen, bedienen sie sich Phrasen wie “Ich muss gehen, ich habe etwas anderes zu tun”, “Es ist schon spät” oder “Ich möchte dich nicht länger stören” oder sie erfinden einfach etwas, um zu erklären, warum sie jetzt gehen müssen. Im Allgemeinen bevorzugen Kastilier meist direkte Strategien. Die Griceschen Maximen der Qualität und der Art und Weise sind besonders salient. Eine pragmatische Regieanweisung für Gespräche mit Kastiliern kann lauten: “Vermeide den anderen zu verletzen, aber sag das, was du denkst, so direkt und klar, wie du kannst.”

## 1. Background

Based on existing literature of various kind, a first attempt of an encompassing contrast of communicative strategies, or speech-act realization patterns, was set up by Grzega (2006: 193-254). As to the Castilian language, the MLA lists roughly 130 studies on speech acts of the Spanish language (about 50 of them on European Spanish); however, the list doesn't seem complete, the articles by Hernández Flores (1999), Portolés Lázaro/Vázquez Orta (2000), Hickey (2005) and the volume by Placencia/Bravo (2002) are missing, for instance. In addition, there is separate website *Estudios del discurso de cortesía en español* (<http://www.edice.org>). Despite this comparatively large number of publications, many speech acts have not been investigated yet. This analysis contributes to a larger project on communicative situations that shall allow readers to see differences and similarities between Europeans. The communicative tasks that are investigated in this article are addressing, answering the phone, small talk, giving arguments, making and turning down an offer, and ending a conversation.

The study uses an alternative to methods that are seen as classical in collecting empirical data for speech-act analysis, the *discourse completion task* (DCT) and the *metapragmatic judgement task* (MPJT) (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989 and Hinkel 1997). In a DCT informants get the description of a dialogic situation and have to complete a dialog. With this method, though, we only get the most salient answer that an informant thinks of. Therefore, the metapragmatic judgment test (MPJT) was designed as a supplementary method. In a typical MPJT all answers provided by a preceding DCT are listed, and informants are asked to rank the appropriateness of the answers. Both methods need to acquire a considerable number of informants. Since the *JELiX* editors' objective is a more generic one, they have created a data-eliciting method that requires fewer informants than a DCT or an MPJT: the semi-expert interview on communicative strategies (SICS). Such an interview (in written or oral form) has informants give not their own personal communicative behavior, but the typical linguistic behavior in their nation, as explained from the point of view of someone who has to describe this to a foreigner. Informants are perceived as ethnographic semi-experts due to their experience within, and observation of, the speech community. This will specifically be true of individuals who deal with language on a professional level (e.g. students of language, linguists, journalists); they are therefore preferred informants. Whereas a DCT presents a situation and asks informants for typical behavior, the SICS presents typical situations and asks for possible and impossible behavior. The informant can select from a list of communicative patterns and/or freely describe patterns. This way a SICS is more like a MPJT, but it requires that informants reflect on a more abstracting and generalizing level.

## 2. Data Collection

A sample of the SICS questionnaire is provided in the introductory article to this special issue of *JELiX* (Grzega/Schöner 2008). The questionnaire was given to Spanish language students and language teachers and eventually returned by 16 informants. The informants mainly come from Murcia, two are from Albacete, one from Cantabria. 12 of the informants were female, 11 were male. Their ages vary from 20 to 29, with an average of 22.3.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Section A: Starting a Conversation

European Castilians, like most other Europeans, distinguish between an informal pronoun and

a formal address pronoun, a T-form and a V-form in the terminology by Brown/Gilman (1960). These pronouns are *tu* (grammatically the 2nd person sg.) and *Usted* (etymologically from *vuestra merced* ‘your honor’, agreeing with the 3rd person sg.). The usage of these pronouns according to the informants is like this:

- (1) All informants agreed that children would use the T-form to address their parents<sup>1</sup>.
- (2) All but three informants agreed that children use T to address older relatives.
- (3) All informants agreed that colleagues at work would use T to address each other. This seems to hold true for business partners as well (although 2 informants claimed that both pronouns are possible). The use of address terms between employer and employee is less clear-cut; here, the degree of individual variation is high.
- (4) All informants but one agreed that administration officials are typically addressed by V.
- (5) Although there may be some exceptions among younger persons, clerks and customers use V to address each other; likewise, strangers in the street are normally given V.
- (6) As far as students’ term of address for their teachers is concerned, both pronouns are possible. Teachers more typically use T to address their students (even if some teachers may also use V).
- (7) Concerning the use of address terms of clerks and customers between each other as well as of strangers among each other, informants state that both are possible. There is slight tendency to favor V (the use of T being preferred by persons who are younger or who want to appear younger).

Brief: in Castilian Spain you normally use T with people you meet regularly and frequently. The power factor may come into play in “professional” hierarchies, though, and require individual rules (student-teacher, employee-employer).

The next section of the SICS dealt with telephone openings. There is no uniform European Castilian opening scheme<sup>2</sup> in private telephone conversations, but *Díga(me)* ‘Speak (to me)’ and *¿Sí?* ‘Yes?’ have turned out to be the most typical. The picture of Castilian business telephone openings is rather fuzzy, but, again, the element *Dígame* is very prominent. Phrases with the company’s name are given 13 times. Elements like *¿En qué puedo ayudarle?* ‘In what way can I help you?’ are only noted down by 5 out of 16 informants.

### 3.2. Section B: Keeping Up a Conversation

Small talk can be roughly defined as the parts of conversation that are not the greeting, the closing and leave-taking phase and the proper motive for the conversation (cf. the definitions also Malinowski 1923, Laver 1975, Ventola 1979). The SICS reveals that in Castilian Spain rules for small-talking are not very clear. Not a single situation listed is considered a typical small talk situation by a majority of our informants. It must be underscored, though, that 8 informants declared elevators a typical small talk setting, so this must be widespread. Likewise, none of the situations given in the SICS is regarded as a small talk taboo situation by a majority of informants. However, 5 informants add “churches” as taboo areas for small talk.

As regards topics, all of the informants have explicitly given the weather as a small talk topic. 29 informants considered this topic central. Other topics are seen as typical for small talk by less than 25% of the informants. Politics is labelled a taboo topic by half of the informants; 7 informants have also given sex as a taboo topic; other taboo topics were ticked by less than half of the informants or added only once.

<sup>1</sup> One informant mentioned that it is also possible to address father and mother with the pronoun of the 3rd person sg., viz. *el/ella*.

<sup>2</sup> The classical studies on phone conversations that many other studies relate to are the ones Schegloff (1979) and Hopper (1992).

There seems to be no clear rule in Castilian Spain for the portion of small talk in private vs. business conversations. 4 of the informants claim that Spaniards do more small talk in private conversations than in business conversations; 9 claim the opposite; 1 claims that there is roughly the same percentage of small talk in private and in business conversations.

### 3.3. Section C: Being Nice in a Conversation

How do Castilians typically formulate their opinion on a topic? Informants sometimes commented their choice of patterns for this task with the labels “very frequently”, “frequently” (or unmarked), “sometimes” and “rarely”. If these labels are converted into points from 4 to 1 and multiplied with the corresponding number of ticks, then the most typical strategy according to the results is: “first you say your opinion, then you give reasons related to the issue” (21 points, 7 informants viewed this strategy as present at least occasionally). The number of informants that see the remaining strategies listed “present at least sometimes” is less than 50 percent for each strategy.

In the next question, informants were supposed to say whether invitations or offers made by someone else can more typically be interpreted literally or as a pure politeness phrase. With this question, the SICS looks for the presence of ostensible invitations (cf. Isaacs/Clark 1990) and similar phenomena. 10 people said that one can reasonably interpret an invitation or an offer can be taken literal, as an honest offer<sup>3</sup>. But 3 said it depended on the persons, 1 said it depended on the phrasing.

### 3.4. Section D: Getting Around Very Uncomfortable Topics

Item #9 in the SICS says: “If people want to turn down an offer or an invitation, what kinds of linguistic means are used to say “no” in a polite way in your nation?” If we convert the labels “very frequently”, “frequently” (or unmarked), “sometimes”, “rarely/not too often” into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the respective number of ticks, then the picture of the most typical strategies is this:

points	persons having ticked at least “sometimes”	
40	11	a vague excuse like “No, I don’t have time.” or “No, I have something else to do.”
36	10	a phrase like “(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know”, though you will surely not contact the person again

The number of informants that see the remaining strategies listed “present at least sometimes” is less than 50 percent for each strategy.

Item #10 consisted of the question “If people disagree with somebody else’s opinion, what kinds of linguistic (and non-linguistic) means are used to say “no” in a polite way in your nation?” If we convert the labels “very frequently”, “frequently” (or unmarked), “sometimes”, “rarely/not too often” into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the respective number of ticks, then we get the following picture of typical strategies<sup>4</sup>:

<sup>3</sup> The various forms of invitations and offers in Spanish (also in comparison to French) are described by Ruiz de Zarobe (2000, 2000/2001, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> On confrontations in arguments cf. Cordella (1996).

points	persons having ticked at least "sometimes"	
41	12	a phrase like "Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ..."
28	8	a phrase like "(No), I disagree.", "(No), I have a different opinion."

The number of informants that see the remaining strategies listed "present at least sometimes" is less than 50 percent for each strategy.

### 3.5. Section E: Ending a Conversation

Since there are no useable cross-cultural pragmatic studies on ending conversations<sup>5</sup>, the SICS asked informants also on this part of a conversation: "what do people say to show that they want to end a conversation?". If we convert the labels "very frequently", "frequently" (or unmarked), "sometimes", "rarely/not too often" into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the respective number of ticks, then we get the following picture of typical strategies:

points	persons having ticked at least "sometimes"	
42	13	a phrase like "I have to go now, I have something else to do"
31	10	a phrase like "It's already late now"
29	9	a phrase like "I don't want to bother you any longer"
23	7	invent a reason

The number of informants that see the remaining strategies listed "present at least sometimes" is less than 50 percent for each strategy.

After this question the logical item to follow was to check the interlocutor's reaction. There is no clear picture: 8 informants thought it to be more typical that the other person lets you go, for 5 it was more common that the other person first tries to persuade you to stay, 1 informant claimed that both are possible and common.

## 4. Summary

All in all, we can state that Castilian Spain prefers mostly direct, bald on-record strategies (in Brown and Levinson's [1987] terminology), although forms of negative and positive politeness and off-record strategies are used as alternatives as well. The Gricean (1975) maxims of quality and manner turn out to be especially salient. If we want to render these observations into a "pragmatic stage direction" for communications with people from Castilian Spain, we could express it in the following way: "Avoid hurting the other, but say what you mean as directly and clearly as you can."

<sup>5</sup> The book by Otterstedt (1993) contains, unfortunately, plenty of factual mistakes. The first study to analyze closing strategies is the one by Schegloff/Sacks (1973).

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