Phonic mitigation markers for disagreement in interviews of university learners of Spanish as foreign language

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In previous studies of the mitigators that occur when a speaker wants to show disagreement with his or her interlocutor, morphosyntactic markers occupy the most relevant part. In oral communication, however, phonic markers play a central role. This research presents the analysis of these markers in a corpus of interviews with B1 level university exchange students (CEFR). The aim is to check for the presence of phonic attenuation markers when foreign students express a divergent opinion in Spanish from that expressed by the native speaker. The analysis leads to a categorization of these markers and attempts to provide empirical basis for a better understanding of the phonic markers in the academic interlanguage.

Keywords: Phonic mitigation, disagreement, academic oral discourse Spanish foreign language

1. Introduction

Mitigation in Spanish has been widely studied in the case of natives from a sociolinguistic perspective. Research embraces oral and written discourse, a variety of registers, as well as different ways of communication such as interviews and conversations. Mitigation in Spanish as foreign language (FL) has been also studied, even in the academic field, where the ability to oppose the position adopted by another person is a decisive linguistic competence. When a foreign student must perform this speech act, he or she needs a high level of pragmatic competence to communicate in the desired way (Iglesias 2001; Félix-Brasdefer 2008; Albelda-Marco and Cestero-Mancera 2011, 2012; Medina-Soler 2012, 2013; Ainciburu 2018). If his or her interlocutor is a native and has greater power in the unequal relationship – as in the case of the student versus a teacher – the ability to attenuate what he or she says is crucial. In this context, different linguistic levels are implied, and phonic level seems to be crucial in terms of improvement in the interlanguage. For that reason, phonic mitigation needs deepest research in immersion situations. Prosodic modulation can substantially change the meaning of an utterance, and attenuation can be one of the hints for the new meaning. Foreign students, in their habitual attendance of traditional university courses, should face more varied input than that provided by the Spanish FL courses in their countries of origin.

The aim of this research is to analyze a series of interviews conducted with different groups of exchange students by a teacher in Spain, in order to categorize the types of phonic attenuation devices that they use when speaking Spanish FL. To do this, we first review previous research, both studies that demonstrate the disagreement strategies of native Spanish speakers and those that adopt a contrasting perspective. Second, we focus on mitigation studies in Spanish FL. The main

research analyzes the discourse of foreign students in 60 focused interviews on the act of disagreement and evidences the variety of phonic markers of mitigation in that oral production.

2. Hedging categories and strategies for disagreement in native Spanish: a contrastive approach

In this section, we focus on hedging categories for disagreement in Spanish oral speech. The findings that follow come from research that contrasts Spanish with other languages. Complete classifications of mitigation markers (MM) based on studies of native speakers of Spanish are included at the end (Domínguez 2001; Albelda-Marco and Cestero-Mancera 2011; Cestero-Mancera 2014).

Research by Félix-Brasdefer (2008) on Spanish and English native speakers reveals that when these languages are compared, MM are more frequent in Spanish than in English; moreover, in English they are used in both formal and informal situations, whereas in Spanish they are used primarily in formal contexts. MM are also different in each language. Native speakers of Spanish (n= 64) use more lexical MM such as *creo que* (I believe that) and *un poco* (a bit). By contrast, native speakers of English (n=64) prefer *maybe* and *probably*, which are considered lexical MM in the group of probability structures. Nevertheless, syntactic mitigation (i.e., conditional tense) is used more frequently in Spanish than in English, which reveals a preference for lexical mitigation.

Differences are also found when comparing Spanish with languages closer to it, such as Romanian. Some mitigation resources are found to be the same for oral speech (i.e., diminutive), although frequency of use varies from one language to another (Dumitrescu 2008), which means

that even when languages come from the same family and share resources, native speakers use them in a different way. Cultural differences are also identified between Spanish and German for specific contexts, such as oral speech used in travel agencies (Albelda-Marco and Contreras-Fernández 2009). Research reveals that mitigation is slightly higher in Spanish, mainly among Spanish customers, who mitigate most frequently. Therefore, the use of MM differs according to their purpose, which implies different resources. In Spanish, for example, expressions relating to mitigation for quantity such as *un poco* (a bit) and *casi* (almost) are frequently used, whereas in German impersonal resources are more common, due to the desire to be distant from the message. Finally, differences between Italian and Spanish have been pointed out in a study of traumatic events (Orletti and Mariottini 2012), which concludes that resources for avoiding the agent when relating a traumatic story are different. Italian uses the first-person personal pronoun in the singular, the zero pronoun, and collective categories such as *Americani* (Americans). Spanish, on the other hand, uses the first-person personal pronoun *nosotros* (we), passive voice, impersonal constructions, as well as the zero pronoun.

As mentioned above, two different taxonomies of MM and strategies are often regarded as complete classifications of hedges in Spanish language. The first taxonomy (Domínguez-Calvo 2001) includes four groups of resources at the macrostructural level of discourse, so no phonic MM device is included: 1. Partial agreement (*Bueno sí, de acuerdo, pero…*/Well yes, all right, but…), 2. Doubt (*Yo no creo que, en lo que conozco al menos…*/ I don´nt think, as far as I know at least), 3. Empathic strategies (*Bueno, tú eres un hombre bien informado, ¿*no?/Well, you´re a well-informed man, aren´t you?) and 4. Impersonality (*Hay que tomar una postura fuerte*/One has to take a strong stance). A second taxonomy is that by Albelda-Marco and Cestero-Mancera (2011, 2012), based on interviews with 26 and 15 native speakers respectively, which is also rooted —as

in the work of Domínguez-Calvo (2001)— in the difference between linguistic structures for mitigation and the discursive strategies performed by those structures. The authors identify nine discursive structures, ordered by frequency of use: 1. Unfocus personal o temporal enunciation (*Se..., uno..., tú..., nosotros.../*Them…, one…, you…, us…), 2. Correct (*Bueno…risas*/Well…laughs), 3. Minimize quantity or quality (*Litotes*, form of understatement always deliberate and with the intention of emphasis), 4. Express assertion using doubt or unknowledge (*Creer…, quizás…, no saber.../*Believe…, perhaps…, not knowing…), 5. Implicate the second person "tú" in speaker saying *(¿No? ¿vale? ¿qué te parece?/*No? okay? what do you think?), 6. Justify (*Es que.../*It´s just that…), 7. Make concessions (*Sí, pero.../*Yes, but…), 8. Restriction of an opinion, assertion or petition (*Para mí.../*For me…), and 9. To make directive acts in an indirect way *(¿No tendrá…?*/ You don´t have…?).

Most recently Cestero-Mancera (2017) found socio-pragmatic differences in the use of mitigation in Madrid as those related to gender, age, and level of instruction. Results showed that men use mitigation more than women —although women use laughter in first place—, older people use more than youngers and people with a high level of instruction use more than people with a low level. Besides, paralinguistic devices, including laughter and vacillations, were found to be the most used mitigation devices overall.

The descriptive character of the taxonomies presented below facilitate the categorization of hedges found in empirical research on MM, presented in next section.

3. Categorization of mitigation hedges and strategies for disagreement in Spanish FL

Research findings on Spanish spoken by learners have revealed a variety of mitigation strategies that agglutinate different types of hedges. Various linguistic levels of language have been studied and each of them has been found to have its own resources. This section examines all of them, taking into account quantitative results of empirical research as well.

The first research compares mitigation in English and Spanish. Félix-Brasdefer's study (2008) reveals preferences for particular types of mitigation hedges used by native English students of Spanish, including two types: lexical MM and syntactic MM. The first group is formed by mental statements such as *creo que*, probability adverbs and adjectives such as *quizá* (sp.) and *possible* (en.), diminutive, quantitative constructions such as *un poco* (a bit) and personal pronouns or formal situations such as *usted*. The second group is formed by tenses such as conditional and imperfect, the subjunctive mode, the exponent of the unknown *no sé* (I don't know), impersonals constructions, and questions for confirmation such as *¿verdad?* (really?). The first group, lexical MM, is preferred by American students of Spanish FL. Approximative mitigators are also preferred by Swedish students, such as *creo* (I think)*, creemos* (we think), *quizá(s)* (maybe)*, algo así* (like)*, algo como* (something like)*, más o menos* (more or less), and *bastante* (quite) (Holmlander, 2011). In the case of this second research, Swedish learners of Spanish FL have been found to use mitigation from two levels: MM and concessive movements. MM include mitigation from 1. Epistemicity, with verbs (*no sé*, *creer*, *parecer*, *suponer*, *pensar* > I don't know, to believe, to seem, to assume, to think) and adverbs (*quizá, a lo mejor, igual* > maybe, perhaps, still), and 2. Approximatives, generalizers and restriction markers (*algo así, como, un poco* > something like, as, a little bit). Moreover, two types of movements were found as well. Allocentric movement

includes pseudo-agreement (*No*, disagreement) and partial agreement (*por una parte sí, por otro lado no* > on the one hand yes, on the other hand no), for example, and saves face for both interlocutors. Autocentric movement, on the other hand, is represented, for example, by epistemic concession such as *no sé* (I don't know)*, pero* (but), and the function of this movement is to save face for the speaker.

General strategies and specific MM for disagreement in oral speech used by non-native in Spanish were catalogued in a pilot study by Medina-Soler (2012, 2013) in the context of academic interaction. Following the study of Spanish native speakers by Albelda-Marco and Cestero-Mancera (2011, 2012), the research conducted by Medina-Soler (2012) reveals the use of strategies and certain MM related to them. Four strategies were found to reply native speaker using disagreement: total disagreement headed by *sí/no*, disagreement with *creer* (to believe) followed by impersonal sentences, agreement with restrictions, and tacit agreement through probability expressions. Besides, the study demonstrates the use of certain phonic MM identified in previous studies for native Spanish (Hidalgo 2007, 2009; Albelda-Marco and Cestero-Mancera 2011, 2012; Cestero-Mancera 2014): 1. Laughter, 2. Pauses and silences, 3. Vocalic lengthening in adverbs *sí* (yes) and *no* (no), 4. Weak pronunciation, and 5. Doubt sounds such as *mm* and *eh* (lexical-semantical MM for Ballesteros 2002, and cuasi-lexical for Cestero-Mancera 2014). A more recent study on prosody and im/politeness in Spanish point out the main role of prosody. The research demonstrates that a low tone associated with a downward tone and a subsequent pause can express a polite mitigating effect, and that a suspended intonation can contribute to mitigating the meaning of the utterance, with could be accentuated by lengthening the last vowel (Hidalgo and Cabedo 2014, 18-19). Besides, tone and intensity followed by vocalic lengthening have been found the

most important mechanisms to mitigate linguistic production in oral conversation in Spanish apart from the combination of different prosody components (Estellés and Cabedo 2017).

Therefore, the existing variety of phonic MM in oral discourse and the lack of empirical studies focused on this resource for Spanish FL reveal the necessity to undertake specific research on this. Such research could compensate for the lack of these relevant MM in an expected complete description of mitigation phenomena in Spanish FL.

4. Empirical data on non-native production

4.1 *The study*

In order to obtain data for the study on oral academic speech, a cross-genre of oral interaction was selected, between the formal/semiformal sociological interview and informal interview. The structure of the interview, based on a question-answer format, operates like an initiator of the interaction, which flows freely once the topic is settled in an informal interview. General topics about the target culture were selected in order to give informants the opportunity to express themselves freely without linguistic limitations; these included topics able to B1 level for the CEFR, such as the weather, food, time, life in the city, life on the campus, and youth and actuality topics. Interactions between native and non-native speakers recorded originated CORELE (Corpus of Spanish as Second Language) that includes sixty samples of language with an average duration of 7 minutes each of a total of 7 hours, 4 minutes and 56 seconds. The corpus is currently being

uploaded to the Talkbank platform to facilitate public access to recordings and transcripts (https://slabank.talkbank.org/access/Spanish/Nebrija-CORELE-UA.html).

In sociological terms, the corpus was made up of 44 women and 16 men, learners of Spanish FL at the University of Alicante, who speak a total of 13 different mother languages. No sampling was undertaken because entire groups of exchange students were involved. To elicit tokens where mitigation was potentially needed, the researcher had previously designed four tactics that were followed freely during the procedure: categorical assertion, defense of the opposite of interlocutors' positions, polar questions, and confirmation questions about stereotypes. Secret recording was not necessary due to the nature of the interaction (familiar context where informants collaborate voluntarily). Moreover, the beginning of the interaction was dedicated to greeting, introducing interlocutors, and requesting informants' personal data, which took nearly ten or fifteen minutes, time that was used to low affective filter of the informants in order to make them forgot that a recording was being made, corroborated by the informal tone audios. In the second part, two transcriptions of the interactions were made. First, a phonetic orthographic transcription was made; and second, MM and types of answers were identified and labelled in accordance with some of the existing conventions from the Val.Es.Co. research group. Some original ones were adapted to CORELE, due to the existence of new research findings in the research.

MM were subsequently catalogued, and the same was done with types of answers. Criteria to consider elements as MM was as follows: reactions to interlocutor´s performance different to a blunt *yes/no* answer. Elements used in place of that straight answer or elements used together with those adverbs were considered modulations of disagreement and marked as MM. After processing the data, the results indicated strategies and mitigation elements corresponding to different

linguistic levels (phonic, lexical, and morphosyntactic) that informants use to express disagreement when talking in Spanish with a native speaker. A description of the phonic mitigation phenomena is included in next section, where examples of the corpus are included.

4.2 *Phonic MM used by non-native speakers of Spanish in interaction*

In interaction with a native speaker, students of Spanish use MM corresponding to three different levels of language: phonic, lexical and morphosyntactic. At the same time, mitigation elements from these three levels of language are articulated to produce various types of answers, using conforming strategies at the conversational or discursive levels of language, as pointed out in the pilot study (Medina-Soler 2012). In the case of phonic MM, the taxonomies presented in section 3 indicate that there is a clear lack of research in the literature about mitigation at the phonic level, whereas lexical, morphosyntactic and discursive mitigation have already received much attention (Félix-Brasdefer 2008; Dumitrescu 2008; Albelda-Marco and Contreras 2009; Orletti and Mariottini 2012; Domínguez-Calvo 2001; Holmlander 2011; Albelda-Marco and Cestero-Mancera 2011, 2012; Cestero-Mancera 2017). However, the pilot study demonstrated the relevance of phonic mitigation, which led to the formulation of the hypothesis that our research has confirmed: the existence of a variety of phonic MM in oral discourse.

Data from our research has provided evidence of the use of a wide variety of MM at the phonic level used by learners of Spanish FL during interaction with a native speaker in oral speech; in fact, seven kinds of resources were identified. Although the aim of our research is a qualitative study of MM – which includes a description and a taxonomy – phonic MM were found to be used most frequently by the informants (1784 entries), followed by morphosyntactic (1433 entries) and

lexical (305 entries) MM, which confirms the relevance of these elements in oral discourse (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of use of MM by linguistic level

Linguistic level	Number of entries
Phonic	1784
Morphosyntactic	1433
Lexical	305

This differs from previous studies on American and Swedish students of Spanish FL. The first group, Americans students, was found to prefer *maybe* and *probably*, which are considered lexical MM in the group of probability structures (Félix-Brasdefer 2008), and Swedish students used more approximative mitigators such as *creemos* (we think), *quizá(s)* (maybe), *algo así* (like), *algo como* (something like), *más o menos* (more or less), and *bastante* (quite) (Holmlander 2011).

In this section, we present MM at the phonic level from CORELE, and how they articulate different types of answers at the discursive level to express disagreement. At the end, findings on quantitative data are included as well. The analysis reveals the existence of categories of phonic markers pointed out previously for native speakers of Spanish (Ballesteros 2020; Hidalgo 2007, 2009; Albelda-Marco and Cestero-Mancera 2011, 2012; Cestero-Mancera 2014), besides two different categories revealed in pilot studies of Spanish FL (Medina-Soler (2012, 2013), *consonantic lengthening*, included in 4. *sound lengthening*, and 5. *Suspension*, which shows a total of 7 different devices: 1. *Sounds of doubt*, 2. *Laughter,* 3. *Pauses;* 4. *Sound lengthening*; 5. *Suspension*; 6. *Weak pronunciation* and 7. *Silences*.

1. Sounds of doubt. Different sounds have been included in that category ("mm", "eh" and "ah") as they express doubt and the use of extra time before giving an answer, which sometimes never comes. Structures such as *no sé* are excluded from this group, categorized at the morphosyntactic level, forming *pretending ignorance or incompetence MM*, as classified by formal criteria in the literature. Also, words such as *bueno* and *vale*, which could have used to gain time, have been excluded because they are not considered phonic markers but lexical. *Sounds of doubt* result in disagreement coming at a later stage, and have a delaying function; like the sound "mm" that precedes disagreement in Sample 1. Different elements in this group are marked by *du*, from *duda* (doubt). At the discursive level, all these elements articulate a response that is known as "mitigated disagreement with a correction with an explanation". This is the case for Sample 1.

Sample 1.

24 E: es una ciudad fea

25 I: si *ma*, yo vivo en un pueblo de dos mil personas

26 E: aha

27 I: y <u>mm</u> *du* la ciudad <u>me me</u> parece bonita

24 E: is an ugly city

25 I: si *ma*, I live in a village of two thousand people

26 E: aha

27 I: and <u>mm</u> *du* <u>I I</u> think the city is beautiful

In this example, disagreement is mitigated by different elements besides the sound "mm" and repetition of *me* before making a correction (*parece bonita*) to the interlocutor's statement (*es una*

ciudad fea), and a previous explanation in line 25. Silence (*si*) in line 25 reinforces contextual interpretation of doubt, but *silences* have been regarded as a different category from phonic MM, because in the data they seem to be associated with different functions.

The use of doubts to express assertion like a mitigation resource has been studied in the literature, although MM with this function correspond to linguistic levels other than the phonetic level – for example, the morphosyntactic level. This is the case with the adverb *quizás* (*maybe*) and certain structures: verbs *creer* (*to think*) and *saber* (*to know*), that last one in the negative form (Albelda-Marco and Cestero-Mancera 2011, 2012). Therefore, some functions of MM from the phonic level have been examined in the literature, for example, expressing doubt; however, phonic MM themselves have not been researched, such as the sound "mm" in the previous example, but rather words and structures with the same meaning.

A second function is also related to these MM. In the example below, Sample 2, the sound *eh* is used in the first place to clarify the assertion made by the informant, which is that 'the city is not ugly' and it is made by the adverb *no* in the answer given to the interlocutor:

Sample 2.

27 E: vale ¿y la ciudad? Es fea

28 I: <u>no</u> <u>eh</u> *du* puede ser que no tiene mucha historia ah, no sé eh parece nueva

    27 E: ok what about the city? It is ugly

    28 I: <u>no</u> <u>eh</u> *du* can be it has not much history ah, I don´t know eh it looks new

Sometimes both functions come together, in the sense that clarification requires time to be carried out, which implies a delay following disagreement. In most cases, contextual interpretation is necessary, as has been pointed out by Domínguez-Calvo (2001) in the case of *bueno*, which can operate merely as an indication of taking a turn to speak, without transmitting agreement or

disagreement. *Sounds of doubt* are the most frequently used phonic MM (579 entries), and the most widely used mitigation resource in general (see Table 2), compared with the various kinds of morphosyntactic (*particles of apparent agreement*, 358 entries) and lexical (*epistemic devices*, 279 entries) MM, which confirms previous studies on Spanish, that showed paralinguistic devices, including laughter and vacillations, were found to be the most used mitigation devices over all (Cestero-Mancera 2017).

Table 2. Frequency of use of MM

MM	Number of entries
Sounds of doubt	579
Laughter	416
Particles of apparent agreement	358
Epistemic devices	279
Pauses	230

2. Laughter. Laughter appears with other MM, although it is unable to conform in itself to any specific kind of strategy – for example, "evasive answers" or "no answers". In the first example from transcription 45, the informant avoids taking a stand on the interlocutor's words in line 167 by means of laughter (*risas* in Spanish, marked in CORELE by *ri*) and a positive comment (*P*) about Spanish food in general and avoidance of any reference to tapas.

Sample 3.

167 E: las tapas son la mejor comida del mundo

168 I: *ri* <u>muy, buena la comida</u> *P* porque yo vivo con un español

169 E: uh

170 I: y él gusta mucho cocinar

171 E: qué suerte tienes

172 I: y cocina PERFECTO

173 E: *ri*

174 I: paellas, yo, yo, yo y hacer muchas comidas tradicionales

167 E: tapas are the best food in the world

168 I: *ri* <u>very, good the food</u> *P* because I live with a Spaniard

169 E: uh

170 I: and he likes cooking very much

171 E: you are very lucky

172 I: and he cooks PERFECT

173 E: *ri*

174 I: paellas, I, I, I and making many traditional dishes

Laughter articulates this kind of "no answer" response by itself, and constitutes the only element produced by the informants, as in the following example, Sample 4, where the informant does not take a stand on the topic, and does not even avoid it, as in the previous example.

Sample 4.

1 E: bien. ¿Te parecen abiertos?

2 I: sí, muy abiertos

3 E: vale. ¿No te parecen un poco? los alicantinos tenemos fama de un poco orgullosos

4 I: _ri_

    1 E: good. Do they seem open to you?

    2 I: yes, very open

    3 E: ok. Don't they seem to you a bit? people from Alicante are known for being a

    bit arrogant

    4 I: _ri_

In the example, laughter before disagreement emphasizes mitigation made by the vocalic lengthening in the adverb of negation. Laughter is the mitigation marker with the second highest number of entries (416) in CORELE after _sounds of doubt_ (579). Besides, it is the only one device significantly more used by female (318) than by man (98) (See Table 3) with an average of 7.2 (See Table 4).

Table 3. Frequency of use of MM by gender

MM	44 Women	16 Men
Sounds of doubt	433	146
Laughter	318	98
Sound lengthening	172	73
Pauses	157	73
Suspension	82	48
Weak pronunciation	78	44
Silences	46	16
**TOTAL**	**1286** **(29.22%)**	**498** **(31.12%)**

Table 4. Average of use of MM by gender

MM	Women	Men
Sounds of doubt	10. 33	10.30
Laughter	7.20	6.20
Sound lengthening	3.80	4.5
Pauses	3.50	4.5
Suspension	1.80	3
Weak pronunciation	1.70	2.75
Silences	1.04	1

Consequently, data in CORELE confirm socio-pragmatic differences in the use of mitigation by gender in previous research on Spanish (Cestero-Mancera, 2017) and on Spanish FL (Medina-Soler 2012, 2013). Results show that man use mitigation more than women (31.12% and 29. 22%), although women use laughter in the first place.

Be that as it may, the use of correction (Albelda-Marco and Cestero-Mancera 2011, 2012) has been corroborated in the corpus, as the preamble of the disagreement explained later. In the next example, Sample 7, laughter articulates a "mitigated categorical direct disagreement". The use of the adverb *no* as the only word articulating the answer makes this strategy a "direct" disagreement, and "categorical" because of the emphatic tone (marked in capital letters). Mitigation results from phonic MM, as indicated at the beginning of the paragraph, but not by an opposite word to the one used by interlocutor – as could have been the case, for example, with the use of *fantástico* in Spanish (*great*), to contrast with *terrible* (*terrible*). In that sense, this kind of response does not represent a correction, and neither does laughter, which in that position seems

to be anticipating the disagreement that requires mitigation, according to the other elements mentioned before.

Sample 5.

97 E: vale. Y el clima <u>terrible</u>

98 I: *ri* <u>NOOO</u>

97 E: ok. And the weather <u>terrible</u>

98 I: *ri* <u>NOOO</u>

3. Pauses. Pauses and *silences* (7) have been considered separately, following the difference of duration pointed by Cestero-Mancera (2014), which is more than a second for a device to be considered a silence. Two types of pauses were identified in the data: long and short pauses. In Sample 6, a short pause marked by / precedes disagreement introduced by the adverb *no*, articulating a "mitigated disagreement", both by the epistemic structure *creo que* (*I think that*) and the pause preceding the adverb.

Sample 6.

104 E: los españoles

105 E: ¿hablan ing inglés bien?

106 E: sí, porque

107 I<u>: creo que</u> *ep /pau* <u>no</u>

104 E: Spaniards

105 E: do they speak Eng English well?

106 E: yes, because

107 I<u>: I think that</u> *ep /pau* <u>they don´t</u>

A long pause appears in Sample 7, which allows the speaker to continue expressing his incompetence and lack of knowledge of the conversation topic, the economic crisis. The use of the pause could be regarded as a way to reduce the tone of the previous mitigation marker *no sé* (*I don't know*, in line 232 and marked by *ig* for *ignorance*), expressed emphatically, as indicated by capital letters. While this may or may not have been the intention of the speaker, it is clear that in both examples, pauses are used prior to the adverb of negation *no*, regarded as a direct way of expressing disagreement. Thus, speakers use pauses before using a confrontation argument, which neutralize impulsiveness and brusqueness to the statement, avoiding the use of a direct *no* at the beginning. The use of such pauses confirms the study by Hidalgo and Cabedo (2014) in Spanish, who found that pauses in a pattern with other prosody components can mitigate the meaning of the utterance in Spanish and have a polite effect. One encounters the same function with the use of a short pause in line 234, which precedes the final statement in line 236, which is a definite negative answer with the adverb *no*.

Sample 7.

228 I: sí parece que no hay tanta crisis pero mi prof profe de Geografía económica

229 I: aha

230 I: toda la tiempo está hablando sobre la crisis y todo

231 E: aha

232 I: pero/ <u>NO SÉ</u> *ig*, es que //*pau* <u>no</u> he leído mucho sobre la crisis antes de ir aquí

233 E: aha

234 I: porque en Austria no es /*pau* <u>no</u> es tan eh no es tan/ ¿presente?

235 E: aha

236 I: el tema de la crisis. Sí es presente claro pero <u>no</u>

228 I: yes it seems that there is no so much crisis but my prof prof of Economic

Geography

229 I: aha

230 I: all the time is speaking about the crisis and all

231 E: aha

232 I: but / <u>I DONT KNOW</u>*ig*, is that //*pau* <u>I have not</u> read a lot about the crisis

before coming here

233 E: aha

234 I: because in Austria /*pau* <u>is not</u> so eh is not so/ present?

235 E: aha

236 I: the topic of crisis. It is present of course but <u>no</u>

Pauses appear in the group of fifth most used MM in CORELE (see Table 2), including morphosyntactic and lexical mitigators (230 entries), which means they are relevant in learner discourse.

4. Sound lengthening. Data show both, vocalic and consonant lengthening, as two subcategories of this MM, with a total of 245 entries: 198 vocalic and 47 consonant lengthening.

4.1 Vocalic lengthening. This consists of the lengthening of the vowel, as in the case of the adverb *nooo*, when expressing disagreement about the character of people from Alicante. In that case, mitigation is also supported by other MM such as repetition of the interlocutor's words (*rep*), and modalized by the suspension (*sus*) of the word *anti* instead of *antipáticos* (*unfriendly*). At the same time, the statement is included in a new mitigation marker, in the sense that it represents a

confirmation answer. The use of *no* makes the type of answer a "direct mitigated disagreement". This is the case for Sample 8:

Sample 8.

1 I: af, sí, me gusta mucho la gente aquí, ah

2 E: pero los alicantinos son muy <u>antipáticos</u>

3 I: ¿<u>anti</u> rep *sus* ? <u>Nooo</u> *alargV*

1 I: af, yes, I live very much people here, ah

2 E: but people from Alicante are very <u>unfriendly</u>

3 I: ¿<u>un</u> *rep sus* ? <u>Nooo</u> *alargV*

The use of this resource is common for reactive *no* in the data, and other MM such as *weak pronunciation* (6) and *consonant lengthening (*4.2.). Therefore, the use of *no* in isolation is not common in learner discourse, where *no* goes together with other elements to form a statement or appears in a mitigated form. The combination of different prosody components for mitigation effect has been examined in the literature; for example, vocalic lengthening with tonal suspension (Hidalgo and Cabedo 2014). That aspect of *no* in Spanish was pointed out both for *yes* and *no* adverbs by Briz-Gómez (1998, 137, quoting Beinhauer 1991, 197). By contrast, there were no entries of any concessive *no*; a reactive *no* is used in Spanish with a mitigation function, as in the example (Briz-Gómez 2006/2014, 14):

A: Entonces, ¿no me acompañas a casa?　　A: So you won't go home with me?

B: No/te acompaño pero me iré enseguida　　B: No/I'll go with you but I'll go immediately

That kind of *no*, whose real meaning is *yes*, is used to create alienation from the interlocutor, mitigating a following disagreement. In the example, the negativity implied in the question *¿no me acompañas a casa?(Don't you come home with me?)* is repaired by *no*, which "rectifies in a mitigated way not only what is said but also what is assumed and implied by A" (Briz-Gómez 2006/2014, 14). The absence of concessive *no* in CORELE may be due to the fact that opinion is an act of speech where questions are not posed with an intention, as in the example. Even if they are expressed in a negative form *(¿No crees que...?/Don't you think that...?)* and include a negative assumption, *no* means *no* in the answers, as in Sample 9. Mitigation in the example comes from the repetition of the adverb in a series (the second and the third *no* in lines 21 and 23, marked in the corpus with *serSN*, series of *yes* and *no* (*sí* and *no* in Spanish). At the same time, the first *no* represents a correction of the interlocutor's words: *no es negativo.* The first *no* before the comma in line 21 articulates a "direct disagreement" response. Mitigation and correction result in it being a "mitigated disagreement with a correction".

Sample 9.

18 I: en Alicante. A mí me encanta esta ciudad porque eh es un contexto internazionale,

19 está gente de todo el mundo y así

20 E: ¿pero no crees que eso es negativo para la ciudad?

21 I: <u>no, no</u> *serSN* <u>es negativo</u>

22 E: tantos turistas

23 I: <u>no</u> *serSN*

24 E: ¿no?

25 I: porque es una mezcla cultural, tú tienes oportunidad de conocer todas las maneras

de

26 viver del otro estados

18 I: in Alicante. I love this city because eh is an internazionale context,

19 there are people from all the World and so

20 E: but don´t you think this is negative for the city?

21 I: <u>no, no</u> *serSN* <u>it is no negative</u>

22 E: so many tourists

23 I: <u>no</u> *serSN*

24 E: ¿no?

25 I: because is a cultural mix, you have the opportunity to know all the ways of

26 life in the other states

4.2. Consonant lengthening. Consonant lengthening consists in a long pronunciation of a consonant in cases of disagreement – for example, the pronunciation of *nn* instead of *n* in the two cases in Sample 10, marked as *alargC* from *consonant lengthening*.

Sample 10.

123 E: pero yo creo que el flamenco como los toros algún día va a desaparecer

124 I: claro, pero es unaaa algo radicado, ¿cómo se dice?

125 E: ¿radical?

126 I: <u>nno</u> *alargC* creo que vas

127 E: ¿no crees?

128 I: <u>nno</u> *alargC*

129 E: vale, porque no sé a los jóvenes, bueno, los jóvenes no van mucho a los toros y no

130 sé si son tan aficionados al flamenco, los jóvenes, no sé

131 I: no sé *ig*

123 E: but I think that flamenco the same that bullfighting will disappear one day

124 I: sure, but is a aaaa something radicado, ¿how do you say?

125 E: ¿radical?

126 I: nno *alargC* I think is

127 E: don´t you think?

128 I: nno *alargC*

129 E: ok, because I don't know young people, well, young people don´t go too

much to bullfighting and

130 don't know if they are so fond of flamenco, young people, I don´t know

131 I: I don´t know *ig*

5. Suspension. Considered a suspended tonema (Briz 1998) in the group of prosodic MM devices (Hidalgo Navarro A. and D. Martínez Hernández 2017)*,* suspension has been studied in Spanish as a mitigation device for utterances that could be accentuated by lengthening the last vowel (Hidalgo and Cabedo 2014). In CORELE (130 entries) happens when the informant does not finish certain words or sentences avoiding direct disagreement, as in line 21 in Sample 11 below. The informant avoids saying that Spanish people are more noisy than German people, which is considered a negative feature, by using only the verb *to be* (*es* in Spanish) with the suppression of *more* (*más*), leaving the statement unfinished (*sus* from *suspension*). A confirmation of the strategy and the hidden form become clear when the interlocutor reveals the word in line 24 (*más* in Spanish), which is agreed to by the informant. If the informant had finished the sentence, he would have used the opposite term (*más*) to that used by the interlocutor (*menos*), that is, a correction, which would have marked explicit disagreement.

Sample 11.

14 E: vale, perfecto. Y quizá te parece que somos muy ruidosos también siempre dicen

15 I: ruidosos sí, en los bares, claro

16 E: ruidosos, sí, vale

17 I: en los bares sí

18 E: pero, pero menos que los alemanes

19 I: ¿cómo?

20 E: menos que los alemanes

21 I: no, es *sus*

22 E: no, no

23 I: no

24 E: vale, MÁS

25 I: más, sí, sí

> 14 E: ok, perfect. And maybe it seems to you that we are very noisy as well it is always said
>
> 15 I: noisy yes, at the bars, of course
>
> 16 E: noisy, yes, ok
>
> 17 I: at the bars yes
>
> 18 E: but, but less than Germans
>
> 19 I: What?
>
> 20 E: less than Germans
>
> 21 I: no, is *sus*
>
> 22 E: no, no
>
> 23 I: no

24 E: ok, MORE

25 I: <u>more, yes, yes</u>

Suspended intonation has been found to contribute to mitigating the meaning in Spanish

6. Weak pronunciation. Weak pronunciation (122 entries) modulates rotundity of the adverb *no*, by making the tone of disagreement less aggressive, as in line 101 of Sample 12 (*prondeb* = weak pronunciation):

Sample 12.

96 E: pero aquí son muy estrictos ¿no?

97 I: pues

98 E: ¿no? Son muy serios

99 I: los que yo tengo <u>no</u>

100 E: ¿no? En Biología ¿no?

101 I: <u>no</u> *prondeb* uno es un poco desorganizado tengo que buscar mi presentación, no sé

102 dónde está como esto y el otro es un poco más estricto, pero sobre todos no muy

103 serios y

96 E: but here they are very strict, are not they?

97 I: so

98 E: are not? They are very serious

99 I: the ones I have <u>no</u>

100 E: no? No in Biology?

101 I: <u>no</u> *prondeb* one is a bit unorganized I need to look for my presentation, I

26

don´t know

102 where is like that and the other one is a bit stricter but in general not very

103 serious and

In general, very assertive expressions are modulated by this resource during the interaction, marking the intensity of exchange – moving from emphasis and categorical assertions to the use of mitigated endings. The use of weak pronunciation has also that function. In the previous example, weak pronunciation involves the adverb *no* in line 101, but the fact that the same adverb in line 99 was produced without any kind of mitigation is remarkable, and this is the second time in the interaction that mitigation takes place. Spontaneous speech such as oral speech could be one of the reasons for this tendency in the corpus. Mitigation seems to be an ability that, if it has not been acquired, needs time to be considered if it is required in the situation; on the other hand, it seems to correct the production, not on a linguistic level, but from a pragmatic perspective. Weak pronunciation was found by Estellés and Cabedo (2017) to be the most useful resource for mitigation in conversational Spanish, as pointed out earlier, but it has a low frequency of use in CORELE.

7. Silences. Silences can appear in combination with other type of MM or without them, articulating a type of answer such as the one in Sample 13, which is a non-answer strategy. In that case, silence (*si*) appears in combination with sounds of doubt (*du*) and laughter (*ri*).

Sample 13.

35 E: ¿y el ruido? No hay mucho ruido

36 I: <u>mm</u> *du si* más que en Alemania, sí pero *ri* yo vivo en el centro del Barrio

37 y aquí siempre hay mucho ruido

38 E: sí

39 I: pero yo tengo una habitación muy tranquila y por eso está bien

35 E: and what about the noise? There is not much noise

36 I: <u>mm</u> *du si* more than in Germany, yes but *ri* I live in the center of The Barrio

37 and here there is always a lot of noise

38 E: yes

39 I: but I have a very calm room and so that it is fine

Silences (62 entries) and *consonant lengthening* (47 entries) have been found to have the smaller number of entries in CORELE.

Additionally, data show no gender socio-pragmatics differences related to preferences of any MM, which are used in the same order by man and woman (see Table 3). Besides, number of hours of instruction and period of the stay in the immersion program (Fase 1, 2 or 3) show different use of MM. Students at the beginning of the immersion program (0-7 hours of instruction) and at the end of it (13-20 hours) used less MM than students in the middle of their stay (7-13 hours) (see Table 5) with no gender difference (see Table 5).

Table 5. Frequency of use of MM by hours of instruction

	Fase 1. 0-7 h		Fase 2. 7-13 h		Fase 3. 13-20 h	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Entries	107	253	275	613	116	420
Average	21.48%	19.67%	55.22%	47.66%	23.29%	32.65%

5. Conclusion

Interest in oral discourse has increased lately, due to the prominent role given to conversation in the communication process, considered nowadays as the ultimate purpose of human language on the one hand, and the objective of learning a language, on the other (Briz-Gómez 1998). As far as foreign languages are concerned, there has been a development from *linguistic competence*, which includes lexical, syntactic, and phonological competence, to *communicative competence*, which includes not only *linguistic competence* but also *fluency* (Vázquez 2000). This later competence brings together strategy, discourse, and cultural competence, the object of pragmatics, a wider perspective that considers not only linguistic phenomena due to the relevance of their role in the communication process, but also other phenomena. *Strategy competence* includes a variety of resources that have been relegated to second place in the literature. The variety of these resources, the complexity of their manifestation, difficulty with the treatment of oral speech, etc., could be regarded as reasons for this lack of interest in these kinds of strategies.

In this paper we have examined and attempted to clarify phonic MM used by non-native speakers as a resource for interacting with a native Spanish speaker when confronting a disagreement in oral speech. Our objective was to contribute to the literature on the topic on the basis of a categorization of a frequent and a complex resource, as is corroborated by its use in the corpus, as well as by the variety of types of phonic MM found in the interactions, confirming pilot studies (Medina-Soler 2012, 2013). Both MM and the act of disagreement in speech have been dealt with in the literature in studies of different languages, sometimes in contrastive studies. Lists of MM of different types and their descriptions, sometimes associated with an underlying strategy, have been provided. Our research demonstrates that some of the MM considered in the previous literature were used by the informants in our study; for example, lexical, syntactic, and conversational markers. Moreover, our research demonstrates the relevance of phonic MM, a

resource with a variety of types and more frequently used in oral speech when there is disagreement than the MM mentioned before and examined by the previous literature. Besides, the resulting typology completes the ones made for natives speakers of Spanish from a macroestructural perspective (Domínguez-Calvo 2001; Albelda-Marco and Cestero-Mancera 2011, 12). On the other hand, results of our research differ from those studies where data showed that students of Spanish FL use more lexical MM, instead of MM from phonic level (Félix-Brasdefer 2008; Holmlander 2011).

The research demonstrates that learners of Spanish FL use seven types of phonic MM in oral discourse, ordered by frequency of use (see 4.2): 1. Sounds of doubt; 2. Laughter; 3. Sound lengthening; 4. Pauses; 5. Suspension; 6. Weak pronunciation; and 7. Silences. Certain of these markers were identified in previous literature for native speakers of Spanish (Cestero-Mancera 2014), that use more phonic MM and with a different frequency of use: 1. Sound lengthening; 2. Sounds of doubt; 3. Laughter; 4. Weak pronunciation; 5. Cuasi-lexical signs as *pff* or *buah*; 6. Silences; 7. Increase of the speed in saying; and 8. Throat-clear. Despite the different frequency of use showed comparing both studies, it is put in evidence the relevance of paralinguistic devices, being sounds of doubts and laughter two of the most relevant phonic MM. Other relevant devices in natives (Hidalgo and Cabedo 2014, 18-19; Estellés and Cabedo 2017) have been identified in CORELE, as vocalic lengthening and suspension, contributors of a mitigating effect in the meaning of an utterance, which confirms that students know such an important resources.

In contrast with previous research on Spanish (Albelda-Marco and Cestero-Mancera 2011, 2012), laughter has not been used by learners for correction but only for attenuation, demonstrating that the use of this resource differs between native speaker and non-native speaker. This implies that an in-depth study is required on this resource, with a view to improving its use when teaching

Spanish FL. Besides, and confirming as well pilot studies on Spanish SL and previously literature for natives, data showed that man use more phonic MM than woman, with the only one exception of laughter. Moreover, a comparison between phonic mitigation in native Spanish and Spanish interlanguage indicates that students of Spanish know and use these resources, but they do not use those that are more frequent in native Spanish. While native Spanish speakers use tone, intensity, and sound lengthening first (vocalic subcategory), students of Spanish most frequently use doubts, followed by laughter, pauses, and sound lengthening (vocalic subcategory). The use of these resources could be regarded as the result of ignorance of the appropriate phonic mitigators; since the resources these students use could be considered as a way to avoid the answer, possibly due to the lack of ability to give a modulated answer by using tone, intensity, etc. On the other hand, one similarity found between native Spanish and Spanish interlanguage is the combination of different resources in the same utterance, especially with sound lengthening. Finally, the research shows that students in immersion use more phonic MM in the middle of their stay, which should be study from a multidisciplinary perspective to find a solid interpretation of data.

In conclusion, phonic mitigators are one of the most relevant resources for attenuating an utterance in conversation, and although students of Spanish use them for that function, they do not utilize the most useful resources used in conversational Spanish to modulate. Their use of phonic resources demonstrates that they use avoiding strategies instead of modulation, probably due to a lack of knowledge.

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