

## Epistemic (a)symmetries and mitigation in the description of conversational markers. The case of Spanish *¿no?*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the relationship between epistemic (a)symmetries and mitigation in three different genres (conversation, interview and monologue) through the study of a specific form: the Spanish discourse marker *¿no?* To do so, an analysis combining qualitative and quantitative methods has been carried out. The main results show how the differences in the distribution of the absolute values of *¿no?* and its mitigating values across genres may be caused by the type of sequences that compose each genre. As for mitigation and knowledge, five different knowledge configurations have been established. Their distribution shows how mitigation seems to favour specific epistemic configurations, whereas non-mitigating data seem to be clustered around other epistemic figures. Taking into account epistemic configurations has also enabled discovery of two different types of mitigation to protect the speaker's face.

**Key words:** mitigation, discourse markers, *¿no?*, conversational analysis, epistemics, interaction

### 1. Introduction

Negotiating the terms on which someone knows something or has the right to know it frequently involves the use of strategies that downgrade the epistemic stance of speakers who do not want to be seen as knowing more than they should (see Heritage & Raymond 2005). In these cases, the role of mitigation (Caffi 1999; Briz & Albelda 2013) as a resource to convey the proper epistemic positioning cannot be doubted. In this paper, we study the intersection between mitigation and epistemic (a)symmetries (also known as knowledge (a)symmetries) in three different genres (conversation, interview and monologue) and through a specific linguistic form, the Spanish discourse marker *¿no?* The study is structured as follows. First, an account of the main theoretical contents is outlined in sections 2 and 3. Next, the methodology is described (section 4), and the main qualitative (5, 7) and quantitative (6) results are presented. Last, section 8 contains the main conclusions.

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## 2. Knowledge (a)symmetries and epistemic primacy

Within the field of conversation analysis, the study of the management of knowledge in interaction has been very prolific during the last decades. With a more or less consistent terminology and definition of the key terms, many studies have been devoted to this topic (Clift 2005, 2006, 2007; Heritage & Raymond 2005, 2012; Stivers 2005; Raymond & Heritage 2006, among others). However, there is not a systematic account of key concepts regarding how speakers manage in interaction with the things they know until the works of Stivers, Mondada and Steensing (2011) and García-Ramón (2018a). Following the conceptualisation by García-Ramón (2018a), we can distinguish between epistemic dependence and epistemic independence. Speakers can have epistemic independence about a specific piece of information if they already know about it beforehand, or epistemic dependence if they are finding out about it through the interaction with an interlocutor. However, this is not the only theoretical development that can be made about the management of knowledge. There is a difference between knowing something (epistemic access) and having the right to assert this knowledge during an interaction (epistemic primacy). Epistemic access refers to the actual knowledge speakers have on a specific topic or piece of information, whereas epistemic primacy is linked with the authority speakers have over the information discussed (García-Ramón 2018a).

If there is a distinction between knowing something and having the right to know it, this fact must leave a linguistic trace on how knowledge is managed in the discourse. Some analysts, therefore, have devoted their attention to answering the following questions: a) how is epistemic primacy established? and b) how is epistemic primacy reflected in the discourse? Kamio (1997) introduces the concept of *territory of information* that refers to information that is close to the speaker (personal information, professional expertise, plans or actions, direct experience and geographic relationship) and analyses how it is expressed in Japanese and English. In a similar fashion, García-Ramón (2018a), through a study of agreement sequences in Spanish, provides a series of parameters that enable the analyst to determine how (a)symmetric knowledge is managed between speakers. These parameters are developed in four principles:

1. epistemic independence: epistemic independence enables more epistemic rights than epistemic dependence;
2. type of evidence: direct access enables more epistemic rights than second-hand access;
3. depth of knowledge: a deeper knowledge enables more epistemic rights than a shallow one; and
4. social closeness: a greater social closeness enables more epistemic rights than a greater social distance.

García-Ramón (2018a, 2018b) not only describes the different notions about knowledge management in interaction and delimits a series of principles that help analyse epistemic (a)symmetries and, thus, epistemic primacy, but also identifies five different epistemic configurations in her study of agreement sequences. This author portrays what the

speakers (represented as A and B) already know (epistemic (in)dependence) in a square and what they have more rights to know (epistemic primacy) with a circle. The dot represents the piece of information dealt with in each context. Figure 1 shows an example of how this graphic representation works. The configuration depicts the piece of information in speaker A's epistemic territory. As for speaker B, the information is inside of what is already known. That is, speakers A and B have epistemic independence (they both know about the information they are talking about), but only speaker A has epistemic primacy.

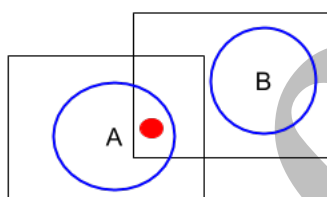


Figure 1. Graphic representation of epistemic configurations

## 2.1 Knowledge and mitigation

Speakers at times downgrade their level of commitment with the utterances they produce. That is, speakers use a concept that is studied within the field of pragmatics under several names, but mainly under *mitigation* (Briz 1998; Caffi 1999; Briz & Albelda 2013; Albelda 2018, among others). With regards to the concepts of epistemic (in)dependence and epistemic primacy, we believe one of the main reasons speakers mitigate their utterances is to weaken their responsibility over a piece of information (see Heritage & Raymond 2005). That is, for example, when speakers have epistemic independence but not epistemic primacy, they might want to use mitigation to avoid being seen as claiming more epistemic rights than those they are allowed by the context (Heritage & Raymond 2005). This is displayed in example (1), in which A is describing how her family has had to seek a caregiver for her grandfather because A's mother works and cannot look after him. Speaker B has epistemic independence since she asks for confirmation about a specific date when the person hired started to work, but since A has more epistemic rights because the story involves her family, B formulates her utterance as a question—using *¿no?* as a mitigating and polar question device simultaneously—based on her previous knowledge that A has to validate.

- (1)  
 19 A: y hemos busca(d)o una- °(bueno la buscamos↓ el el- )°  
 and we have looked for- - well we looked for her on on--  
 20 B: el lunes empezó la mujer ¿no?//  
 the woman on Monday started **right?**  
 21 A: para que↑- por ejemplo mi madre como se va a trabajar por las mañanas↑§  
 to- for instance since my mother goes to work in the mornings

Even if conversation analysis does not deal directly with a theory of mitigation, a fair amount of allusions to a strategy—often phrased (*epistemic*) *downgrade*—is used in a similar fashion to what the concept of mitigation depicts (Heritage & Raymond 2005; Stivers 2005; Stivers, Mondada & Stensig 2010; Sidnell 2012). Other works such as Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012) do combine the concepts of conversational analysis with concepts used as a basis such as *face* (Goffman 1967) and the concern for speakers' faces in interaction (Brown & Levinson 1987). Lastly, García-Ramón (2018b) examines how epistemic asymmetries and epistemic primacy interplay with mitigation and intensification. All these instances show that there seems to be a relationship between mitigation and the management of knowledge.

For the purposes of this study, we will follow Albelda's (2016: 30, translation is ours) definition. The author describes mitigation as a "pragmatic strategy developed to cater to facework needs and aimed at mitigating and minimizing the intensity of what has been uttered weakening the illocutionary force of speech acts [...] as well as an argumentative strategy that enables speakers to lessen the commitment with what has been said and thus successfully reach their conversational goals" These "conversational goals" are linked with the functions they establish that mitigation can have. These functions are developed around the concept of face introduced by Goffman (1967: 5) that refers to "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact". Attention will be especially paid to the distinction between mitigation for self-protection purposes (that is, to protect the speaker's own face) and mitigation to prevent damages to the hearer's face.

### 3. ¿No? as a discourse marker

The works of Ortega Olivares (1985, 1986) set the foundations for the most recent research on a subset of markers that manage interaction, wherein the Spanish discourse marker *¿no?* is found. In Briz's (1998) definition of *control of contact markers* are included markers that have expressive, appellative and phatic functions that are "materialised in the discourse as a reaffirmation or a justification of the self, of their behaviour or of what has been said" (Briz 1998: 224-225, translation is ours). Based on Briz's definition, authors like San Martín (2011) have delimited a subgroup of markers while taking into account only those markers that have an interrogative form: *interrogative control of contact markers*. In turn, Fuentes & Brenes (2014) and Cestero (2019) give a thorough account of how this subgroup works by integrating different levels (Fuentes & Brenes work modal, interactive, informative and enunciative levels and Cestero with modal, interactive, structural, informative) at which these kinds of markers can act and underscoring the fact that they can work in more than one level at once.

Studies that have tackled more specifically the description of *¿no?* coincide in assigning at least two functions: to ask for confirmation and to act as a phatic device (Ortega

Olivares 1985, Santos Río 2003 and Fuentes 2009). Other authors who also have taken into account these two values have produced more fine-grained functions or have included new ones. Some authors distinguish between searching for confirmation of an opinion (García Vizcaíno 2005, Rodríguez Muñoz 2009, Santana 2017), of a question (García Vizcaíno 2005) or of the content stated (Santana 2017). Montañez (2015) includes in her study of *¿no?* the instances in which it is used as the only member of an intervention—that is, in an independent position—and she claims that in these cases, the marker asks for an explanation or repetition. On the other hand, García Vizcaíno (2005) considers there are expletive uses of the marker, meaning that some instances have no function at all.

The mitigating value of *¿no?* has been consistently described in the literature. Ever since one of the first works that studied this marker with more detail (Ortega Olivares 1985) to more recent publications like García Vizcaíno (2005), Rodríguez Muñoz (2009), Landone (2009), Montañez (2008, 2015), Fuentes and Brenes (2014), and Cestero (2003, 2019), mitigation has been identified as one of the values of this marker. In fact, some publications (Uclés 2017, 2018) have focused entirely on describing the mitigating function of *¿no?*, among other control of contact markers.

Within the field of conversation analysis, studies have dealt with question tags in English (a functional equivalent of *¿no?*) and epistemic (a)symmetries. In works like Heritage & Raymond (2012), Heritage (2012) and Sidnell (2012), question tags are presented as devices that can regulate the epistemic rights speakers claim to a piece of information. Specifically, when using question tags, a speaker shows a weaker epistemic stance than with an affirmation, but a stronger commitment than with a full question. This idea of question tags being in the middle ground of a gradient between an affirmation and a question is also noted in Cuenca and Castella (1995), who perform a multilingual analysis of these elements. For the Spanish language, although it is not the main scope of her work, García-Ramón (2018a) also recognises how *¿no?* can act as a device to manage knowledge.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study analyses the different epistemic configurations that mitigation adopts in different genres, with special emphasis on their link to mitigation. To do so, a specific form has been studied, the Spanish interactive marker *¿no?* As described in the literature (see section 3), this marker seeks the hearer's attention to ensure he or she is engaged or to ask for confirmation, and it can also be used as a mitigating device. These features enable us to believe it can also be part of knowledge management, which is essentially an interactive activity. Since their distribution in different genres will be compared, the genres have been chosen according to a varying degree of interactivity. A representative sample of corpora has been collected. Specifically, three genres have been selected that form a gradient of interactivity from more to less interactive: conversation, interview and monologue. A sample of about 20,000 words has been chosen for each genre (around 60,000 words in total).

Two of the three corpora used (PRESEEA and Val.Es.Co. 2.0) belong to corpus projects publicly accessible and have been designed keeping in mind representativeness. The third corpus consists of a self-compiled collection of monologues in Spanish from YouTube. Although a sociolinguistic study exceeds the objectives of this paper, balance in terms of gender and different social levels (low, medium and high) has been sought. As for the dialectal homogeneity, all three corpora belong to the same variety of Spanish, that is, they include speakers from the region of Valencia.

Genre	Corpus	Number of words
Conversation	Val.Es.Co. 2.0	22151
Sociolinguistic interview	PRESEEA Valencia	19646
Monologue	YouTubers corpus	19794

Table 1. Corpora used in the study

After the corpora compilation, a database with all instances of *¿no?* has been built. The data have been annotated by taking into account six variables: *genre*, *mitigation*, *mitigation function*, *type of sequence*, *polar question* and *epistemic figure*. The annotation scheme that has been followed contains the following structure.

Variable	Variant
Genre	Conversation Interview Monologue
Mitigation	Yes/No
Mitigation function	Self-protection Prevention
Type of sequence	Storytelling Assessment Directive Descriptive Argumentative
Polar question	Yes/No
Epistemic figure	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Table 2. Annotation scheme

As it is seen with deeper detail in section 6, a quantitative analysis taking into account the frequencies of variants established in the database has been carried out. Since the samples of the corpora are close in size but do not match exactly the number of words, the frequencies have been standardized.

## 5. Epistemic configurations of *¿no?*

One of the objectives of this study is to analyse how the marker *¿no?* is used for knowledge management. To cover this topic, the data have been annotated following the graphic representation of epistemic configurations García-Ramón (2018a) introduced. Since this study addresses agreement sequences, the author's original figures have been expanded to accommodate our data. In total, five figures have been identified. Two are taken from García-Ramón (2018a), and three have been developed following this work's

proposal. It must be noted, however, that only the figures that have been found in the data are represented, but they do not exhaust all the possible configurations that can be found in interaction. In this section, first, the epistemic configurations identified in the data will be presented and discussed. In the second part, a quantitative analysis will be carried out taking into account the variables of mitigation and genre.

### Configuration 1

In this kind of configuration, there is epistemic independence, that is, the interlocutors already have access to the information, and they also share epistemic primacy. They both are entitled to claim they have a right to know about the information being discussed. It is usual to find this kind of structure in co-constructed discourse (García-Ramón 2018a).

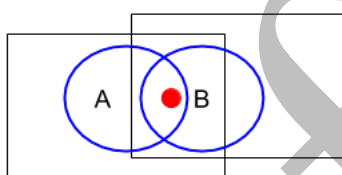


Figure 2. Epistemic configuration 1

In example 2, a group of friends is talking about a boy fancied by A who lives in Argentina. Even though the story belongs closely to this speaker, her friends—speakers B and C—give advice on how to deal with the situation.

(2)

105A: § pero es que el año pasado estaba en mi grupo ¿no? y le escribí↑ y por- para navidad↑ y esas cosas y le escribí↑ y no me contestó↓ y luego↑ cuando vino a Valencia vino un día aquí a Valencia/ se lo dije le dije ¡hala! no me has escrito no se que dice *noo es que no me gusta escribir no escribo nunca a nadie no se menos entonces mee/ pos si yo podría escribirle a [él perfectamente pero- pero sé que igual no me contestaa]*

but last year he was in my group right? and I wrote to him and for- for Christmas and such and I wrote to him and he didn't answer me and then when he came to Valencia he came one day here to Valencia and I told him I told him *hey you haven't written me back and such* and he says *it's just that I don't like writing I never write to anyone and so and so* then I- well yeah I could write to him sure but- but I know he may not answer me

106 B: [pues le pones una carta y le dices *ya sé- ya sé*] [*quee=*]  
so you write to him a letter and you tell him *I know I know that*

107 C: [claro]  
right

108 B: = *que noo te gustaa escri- o sea ya no tee- ¿que no te gusta contestar? pues aquí te mando mi teléfono↑ y a ver si- ee- y [por favor me llamas↑]*  
that you don't like write- I mean you don't- you don't like to answer? alright I send you my number and let's see if- eer- and please call me

109 C: [*me llamas y si*] no que le den por culo tía si no te [llama ni te eh=]  
call me and if he doesn't then fuck him if he doesn't call or

110 B: [y ya está]  
and that's it

111 C: = *cribe eh que pasa de ti/// [¿no?]*  
write back he doesn't give a damn about you right?

112 B: [y ya está] tía yo qué sé  
and that's it it's just I don't know

113 A: sí tía

A shallow analysis of the situation could claim that only A has epistemic primacy, considering she is the one directly involved in the story. In fact, speaker A is not only related with the story at an epistemic level, but the outcome of the conversation may result in her taking some kind of action regarding the relationship with the boy they are talking about. However, B and C claim their right as speakers with epistemic primacy by being self-proclaimed advice-givers. The suggestions they deliver are formed in a quite straightforward manner: there is not a trace of mitigation, either with *¿no?* or any other form. In fact, they use the second person singular present as a form of directive to describe the actions she should take with the boy (*le pones una carta y le dices*), they also use direct speech recreating a potential message she should deliver to him and they outline the reaction she should have if he does not respond favourably (*y si no que le den por culo tía*). All these traces in the discourse leave very little room to doubt that speakers A, B and C do show a shared epistemic primacy.

### Configuration 2

This is the epistemic configuration of a question for which the speaker does not know the answer (as opposed to the questions based on the hypothesis, a topic that will be discussed later). The access and the epistemic primacy of the information being dealt with are exclusively held by speaker B. In our data, this kind of configuration is identified when *¿no?* is used as a device to ask polar questions.

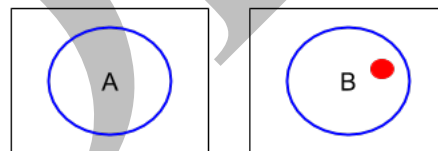


Figure 3. Epistemic configuration 2

Example 3 shows how C, at a given point of the conversation, is reminded of a joke related to the topic of the conversation and asks his interlocutors if they know it.

- (3)  
 348 B: los Control  
       the Control ones  
 349 A: ¿los que?  
       what?  
 350 C: los preservativos Control  
       Control preservatives  
 351 B: ¿porque no te importaría? ¿no?  
       because you wouldn't mind would you?  
 352 C: ¡ay! ¿os sabéis el chiste este? ¿no?  
       hey! you know the joke don't you?  
 353 A: ¿cuál?  
       which one?



- 354 C: *¿me da un preservativo? ¿Control?/// no sino- no no el que va ostras va un gnomo a una farmacia§*  
*can I have a preservative? A Control one? no but- no no the one where a gnome goes to a drugstore*
- 355 B: § *¿un gnomo?*  
*a gnome?*
- 356 C: *un gnomo sí un gnomo*  
*a gnome yes a gnome*

Val.Es.Co Corpus 2.0, Conversation 19

In this context, speaker C does not know for sure if the other speakers are familiar with the joke he is about to tell. Therefore, his intervention is a question that stems from his lack of information about the speakers' knowledge. The fact that the referent is not shared by the speakers is also reflected in the discourse in A's response, because it shows he does not know what joke C is referring to (*¿cuál?*).

### Configuration 3

The epistemic access and primacy belong to speaker A, while speaker B is in a position of epistemic dependence. It is common to find this kind of epistemic configuration in storytelling sequences.

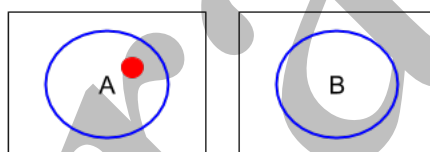


Figure 4. Epistemic configuration 3

An example of this configuration is found in example 4 when C is talking about how a boy she thinks was interested in her was acting during a bus ride. This information is a personal experience the speaker has had and, therefore, this endows her with epistemic primacy over the other interlocutors (A and B). The other participants in the conversation were not present when the events happened and are being informed of the facts for the first time. In fact, in previous interventions, speakers have made explicit references about how they had new things to tell each other. In this case, a speaker (C) has epistemic primacy and independence (in form of a narration of her own experience) and the interlocutors (A and B) are epistemically dependent, since they did not have previous access to the information, as is shown in their interventions (B produces an assessment only after having heard C's story).

- (4)
- 233 C: = y tía cada vez que yo hacía / *ay no* le estaba hablando con el Miguelín o con quien fuera no sé que o no sé cuantos y se giraba *¡ay! sí sí porque no!* todo el rato intentando meterse en mis conversaciones↑ *¿no?* y yo ahí// y tía/ [te lo juro=]  
 and every time I said *uh no* he was taking with Miguelín or whoever saying this and that and he turned around saying *oh yeah right because it doesn't* trying to butt in all the time right? and I was there like- I swear to you

234 B: [¡qué fuerte!]  
 woah  
 235 C: = me quedá-↑ tía me quedé↑ §  
 I was like I was like

Val.Es.Co corpus 2.0, conversation 20

#### Configuration 4

Both speakers show independence in the access of information, but only one of them is entitled to claim more rights over the topic. This kind of epistemic configuration is found in assessments and in polar questions that are based on speaker A's pre-existing knowledge of the matter that B—being the speaker with epistemic primacy—has to validate. This graphic representation is similar to the one in configuration 2. However, there is a main difference: in the case of the former, there is epistemic dependence, and in the case of the latter configuration, both speakers have epistemic independence.

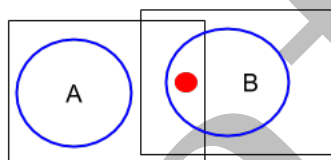


Figure 5. Epistemic configuration 4

In example 5, *¿no?* is used as a polar question device with a mitigating value. The interviewer has previously asked the interviewee how to cook paella after he has declared this is a dish he knows how to prepare. With this assertion, the interviewee claims more epistemic rights on the matter. During the description of preparing the dish, the interviewer intervenes with an opinion of his own. This contribution is produced in a specific manner: even if the interviewer has previous access on how to cook paella, he is aware that the interviewee has to validate his intervention, since he is the one who has epistemic primacy in this context. For this reason, the interviewer feels the need to mitigate so as not to claim more epistemic rights than the ones he is entitled to.

(5)  
 I: [...] se le echa el arroz // y dieciocho o veinte minutos de coción / y / es tenerle la medida / al a la paella  
 I: [...] rice is added to it and eighteen or twenty minutes cooking and it's all about getting the hang of the paella  
 E: y al fuego **¿no?** también  
 E: and of the fire right? as well  
 I: y eso es muy importante  
 I: and that's very important

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This kind of epistemic configuration is different from the one described in configuration 2, in which *¿no?* is also used to formulate questions (in a similar fashion as the English question tags), but the speaker asking the question has epistemic dependence. That is, in

configuration 2, questions are asked to gather unknown information, and in configuration 4, questions are asked to be validated by the speaker with epistemic primacy.

Another difference is that the current configuration not only allows polar questions, but also assessments would fall into this kind of knowledge schema. See, for instance, example (6):

- (6)
- 77 A: [y mi padre↑] ¿qué ha hecho?/ ha paga(d)o la fianza/// del hombre/ pero claro/ por lástima de ella// ¿sabes? porque con ella tenemos- siempre hemos tenido confianza↑ y ELLA estaaba/ toda histérica perdida↑/ y entonces pues dice que l'ha paga(d)o mi padre// y NADA el- el hijo↑ encima es que es drogadicto/ el hijo/  
and my father] what has he done? he paid for the bail for the man but yeah out of pity of her you know? because with her we have- we've always known her and she was completely out of her mind / and then
- 78 B: °(si que está todo mal→)°  
everything's wrong damn
- 79 A: el hijo es drogadicto estuvo en la cárcel también  
her son is a drug addict he was in jail too
- 80 B: ¡qué ambiente! ¿no? / más guay  
what a nice environment isn't it?

Val.Es.Co corpus 2.0, conversation 21

Speaker A is telling a story about an acquaintance of hers, whose husband has allegedly been charged with sexual abuse of minors. She describes the dire situation of the family: the father has been arrested, the family does not have money to pay the bail and the son has a drug addiction problem. Speaker B makes an ironic assessment of the events (*¡qué ambiente! ¿no? / más guay*) using *¿no?* as a mitigation device. This speaker wants to show engagement in the story she is being told (Pomerantz 1984, Stivers 2008, Couper-Kühlen 2012), but she has less epistemic rights than A. For this reason, she opts to assess the situation but establish she does not take epistemic primacy and leaves room for her interlocutor to validate her claim.

### *Configuration 5*

This epistemic configuration differs slightly from the ones seen in this section insofar as the positioning of the second speaker is not relevant—or even known at times. It is found when speakers, even if they have epistemic independence and discuss a topic, actively avoid claiming epistemic primacy. In our data, this is commonly found in argumentative sequences belonging mostly to interviews and monologues. In these genres, identifying the epistemic position of the interlocutor accurately is extremely complicated, if even possible. The position of only the first speaker is, notwithstanding, relevant to knowledge management, since the active refusal to claim epistemic rights is believed to be linked with the mitigation function of self-protection (Briz & Albelda 2013).

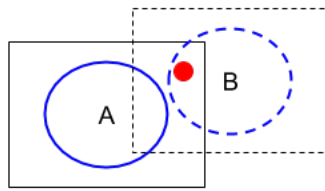


Figure 6. Epistemic configuration 5

Example 7 shows this epistemic configuration in the genre interview. The interviewer is asking the interviewee about his opinion on the Yugoslavian War.

- (7)  
 E: ¿y las guerras étnicas / por ejemplo la de Yugoslavia?  
 E: and the ethnical wars / for example the Yugoslavian War?  
 I: <silencio/> ¡hombre! / es que<alargamiento/> ahí ya entran son muchos años ¿no? / y<alargamiento/> <vacilación/> y viene mmm desde muy atrás // es igual / no sé que en<alargamiento/> <vacilación/> es que con los judíos y los alemanes ¿no? / en aquella época / la verdad es que mmm / todo lo de la xenofobia<alargamiento/>  
 I: well it's just that that's been going on for many years right? and and it goes a long way back it's like I don't know in- that with Jews and the Germans right? in that period to be honest err all these things about xenophobia

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Linguistic traces of hesitation and uncertainty can be identified in the interviewee's answer. There is a moment of silence between the question and the answer and, throughout the interviewee's intervention, there are several marks that show how the speaker tries to protect his face such as the interactive marker *¿no?* and depersonalisation. Clearly, the interviewee wants to claim as little—if any—epistemic rights as possible. His uncertainty is also shown in the use of reformulations (*es que<alargamiento/> ahí ya entran son muchos años ¿no?*), hesitation marks, and word lengthening, as well as the mitigation strategies already described. However, the epistemic positioning of the interviewer is unknown and, thus, it cannot be analysed or represented.

The same epistemic configuration is also commonly found in the genre monologue, as example 8 shows. The video is devoted to trying out the food that Spanish soldiers eat on the battlefield.

- (8)  
 P: y no hay no hay cubiertos han cubiertos me parece un pocoo mal ¿no? eeh yo qué sé vale que los soldados son son soldados ¿no? pero todavía son personas y necesitarán los cubiertos para comer  
 and there is there is no cutlery I think that's a bit wrong isn't it? eer I don't know soldiers are soldiers but they are still people and they are gonna need cutlery to eat  
 Perxिताa\_Probando comida militar

In this excerpt, the speaker finds out there is no cutlery in the package, and he seems upset about it. However, his complaint is joined by a generous use of mitigating devices (depersonalisation and the use of *¿no?*, *un poco*, *yo qué sé*). He does not want to claim epistemic rights over his opinion, since doing so can be interpreted as a potential offence to the army of the country he is from, which can be negatively received. For this reason,

the YouTuber uses mitigation to actively weaken his epistemic commitment. In this case, the interlocutor is a wide audience—the video viewers, who can include people in the military—unknown and virtually impossible to monitor, since there is no real-time interaction.

After the data annotation, an analysis has been carried out that has led to the results that will be presented in the following sections. First, the quantitative results of the distribution of  $\zeta no?$  and its frequency as a mitigating device will be discussed (6.1). Second, the mitigation results will be linked to the types of sequences found in our data (6.2). Next, the epistemic configurations used to analyse the management of knowledge (a)symmetries will be presented (6.3). Last, as a result of the epistemic analysis, a distinction within the mitigation function *self-protection* in terms of knowledge (a)symmetries and its consequences to the study of mitigation will be accounted for (section 7).

## 6. Quantitative results

### 6.1 Distribution of $\zeta no?$ across genres and sequences

In this section, the distribution of  $\zeta no?$  in the different genres will be explored. Before starting the analysis of its mitigating value and the relationship with knowledge (a)symmetries, the differences between absolute values of  $\zeta no?$  and only the mitigating value should be addressed. Figures 7 to 9 show different representations of how the interactive marker  $\zeta no?$  is distributed across genres. The absolute value (Figure 7) will be compared against the mitigating value (Figure 8) and the mitigation productivity (figure 9) of each genre.

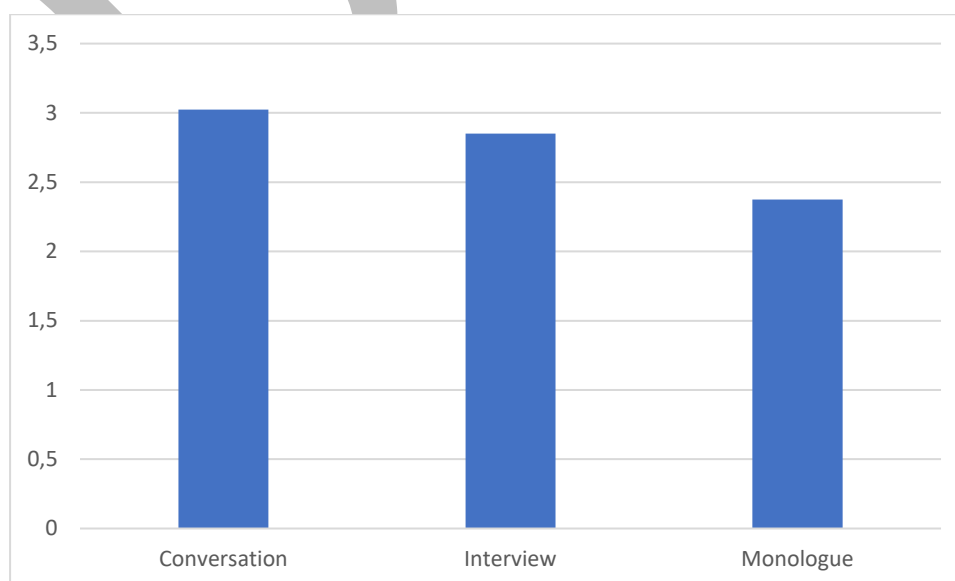


Figure 7. Distribution of  $\zeta no?$  across genres (per 1,000 words)

Figure 7 shows the frequency of  $\zeta no?$  per genre are in our corpora. The figures have been standardized, thus showing the number of instances of  $\zeta no?$  in 1,000 words. The genre that gathers the most is conversation, followed—with a moderate decrease in the number—by interview and monologue, respectively. The fact that conversation has the most cases is unsurprising, since it is the most interactive genre and therefore is bound to gather a considerable quantity of devices that manage interactivity. The most striking data extracted from the corpora are the results of the genre monologue. Although it has fewer cases than conversation and interview, the difference between the three genres is not very steep: there are 3 cases of  $\zeta no?$  per 1,000 words in conversation, whereas in monologue the number only reduces to 2.4. This is particularly remarkable since there is no interaction, at least as it is classically conceived. Even if there is going to be an audience—in cases of famous YouTubers, quite a wide one—it is not a real-time face-to-face situation, making more striking the apparent need of the monologist to use elements that are interactive at its core.

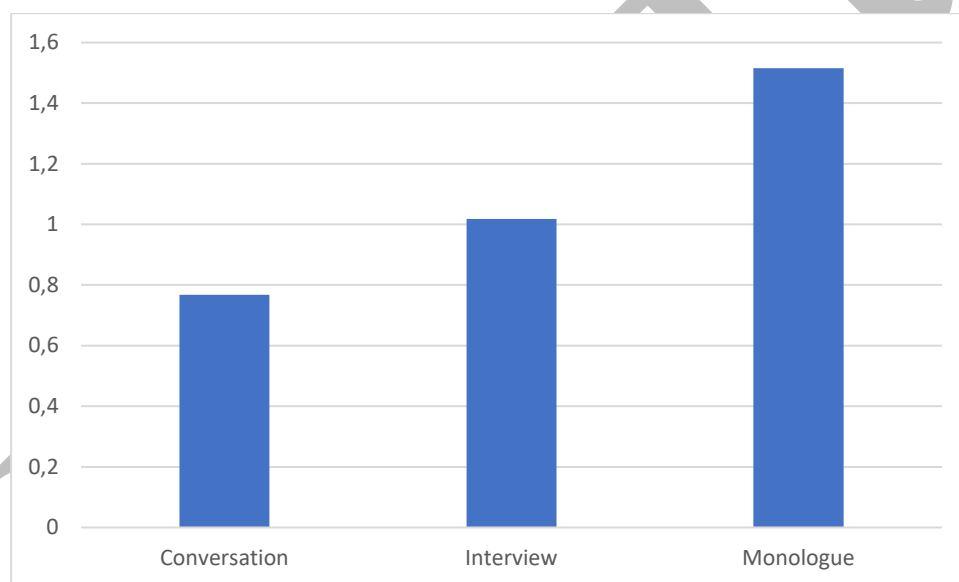


Figure 8. Distribution of the mitigating value of  $\zeta no?$  across genres (per 1,000 words)

The distribution of  $\zeta no?$  with a mitigating value across genres (Figure 8) shows a quite different shape than the one presented by distribution of the absolute values of this marker (Figure 7). Comparing both figures reveals an inversion in the trend of the data. The genre conversation has the fewest instances of  $\zeta no?$  devoted to mitigation, and the genre monologue, on the other hand, has the most. This contrasts with the results in Figure 7, in which conversation is the genre with more markers and monologue has the least. These results preliminarily indicate that the number of cases of  $\zeta no?$  employed to mitigate is bound to be reduced in conversation and boosted in monologue.

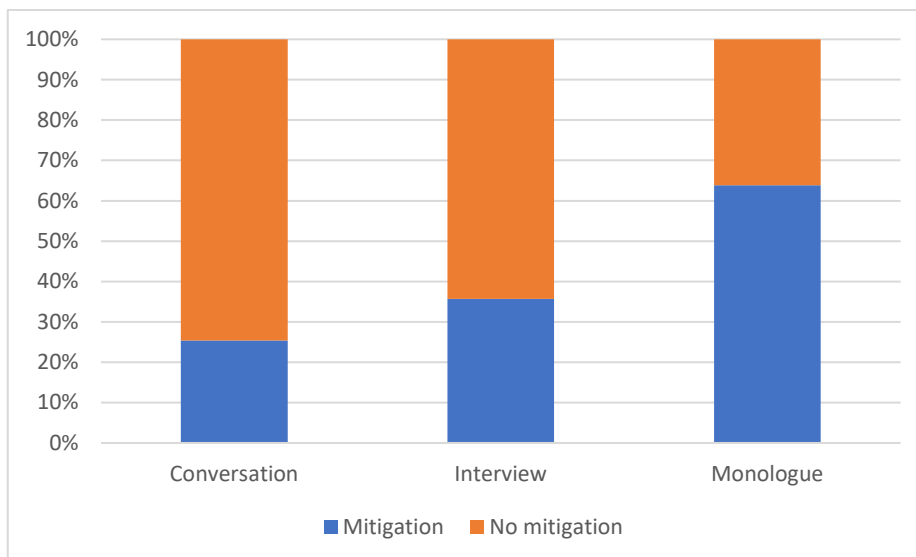


Figure 9. Mitigation productivity of  $\zeta no?$  across genres (in %)

The terms of this switch across genres in the frequency of  $\zeta no?$  between absolute values and mitigation values can be better seen in Figure 9. In this graph, the productivity of  $\zeta no?$  as a mitigation device is reported for each genre. As Figure 8 showed, the most productive genre seems to be monologue, with over 60% of the instances of  $\zeta no?$  being used for mitigation. Conversely, in conversation, only one-fourth of the data is employed to fulfil this pragmatic strategy. The genre interview occupies the middle ground between the results of monologue and conversation and uses 35% of the cases to mitigate. Given the variations regarding the results across genres, one might wonder what causes led to the same form having a wide range of productivity in mitigation. In the next section, an explanation for the intergeneric differences taking into account sequences will be discussed.

## 6.2 Mitigation and sequences

As was explained in the methodology (section 4), the annotation scheme for the data has taken into account the genre, the mitigating value, the epistemic configuration and the type sequence. The annotation of the type of sequence in which  $\zeta no?$  appears has enabled checking for differences in terms of the frequency of this marker as a mitigation device—the object of study in this paper—and also comparing the distribution of such sequences in different genres. Figure 10 shows the mitigation rates in each genre. Storytelling (14%) and descriptive (38%) sequences are on the lower side of mitigation productivity, whereas the highest rate of mitigation is found in directive (80%), assessments (78%) and argumentative (62%) sequences.

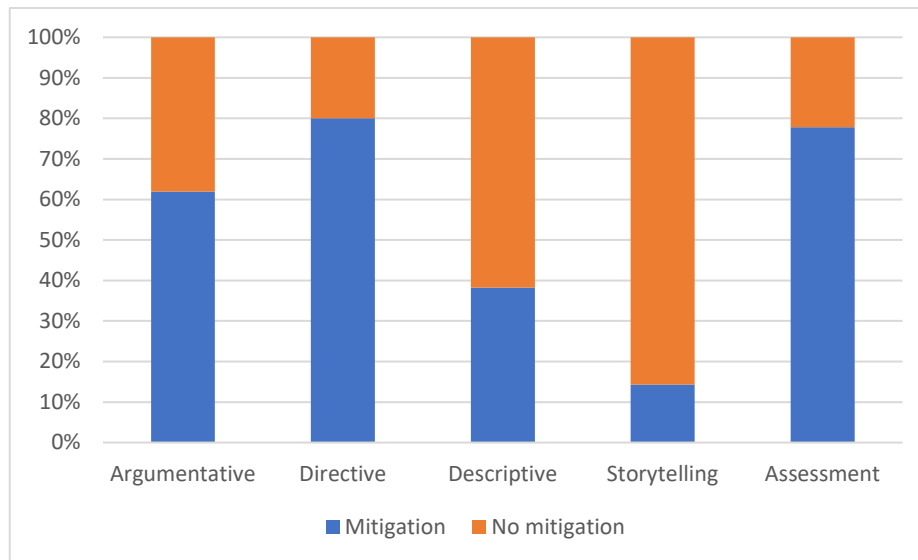


Figure 10. Mitigation productivity across sequences (in %)

Focusing on the purposes of this paper, if the data on Figure 10 are crossed with the results of Figure 11, this can also help explain the identified changes in frequency (Figure 9).

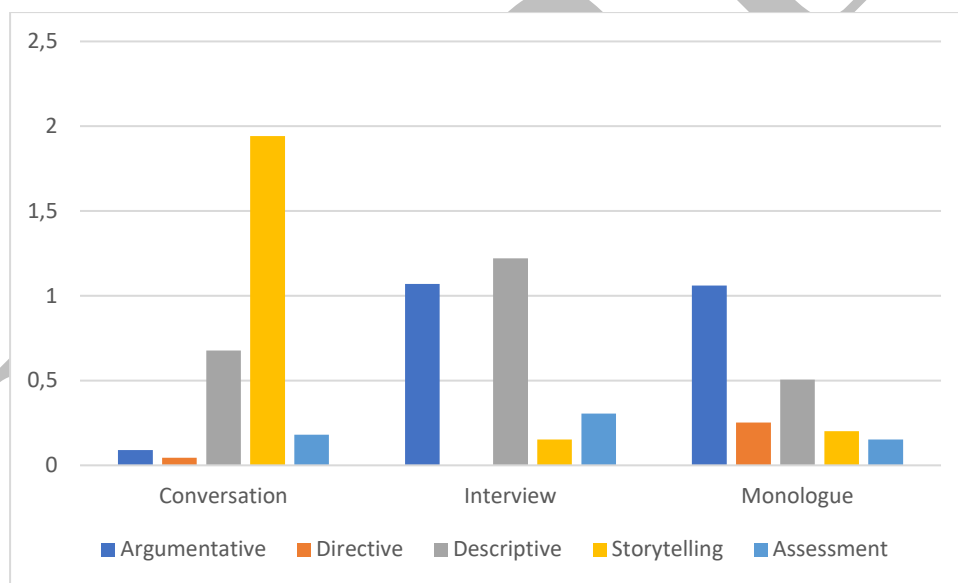


Figure 11. Number of sequences in which ¿no? appear for each genre (per 1,000 words)

Figure 11 depicts the quantity of each type of sequence for each genre. At first sight, the distribution of sequences varies widely across genres. If there is a different distribution of sequences in each genre and each sequence has different productivity levels of mitigation, these results can explain why a genre may have a greater or a more reduced amount of mitigation depending on the type of sequences it gathers.

As can be observed, conversation—the genre in which less mitigation is found—is composed mainly of storytelling sequences. These storytelling sequences possess a very low mitigation rate and thus provide a tentative explanation of why there is such a reduced level of mitigation in conversation. On the other hand, monologue—the genre in which



most mitigation is found—gathers mostly sequences that have high mitigation rates (argumentative) and, most importantly, has a limited number of instances of sequences with low mitigation productivity (storytelling, descriptive). Therefore, seeing how sequences are distributed in monologue, it is little surprising now that in our data, this genre shows the highest degree of mitigation. Interviews have a fair amount of sequences that are bound to mitigate at a higher frequency (argumentative, assessments), but also have an elevated number of descriptive sequences, in which the rate of mitigation is lower. Thus, since it combines high and low mitigation sequences, the level of mitigation overall is higher than in conversation but lower than in monologue.

### 6.3 Epistemic figures and mitigation across genres

Once the epistemic figures have been described (see section 5), their distribution taking into account the genres and the mitigation values will be discussed. Figures 12 and 13 show how epistemic configurations are grouped when they present a mitigation value and when they do not, respectively. As can be seen, the epistemic figures are not evenly distributed across genres in either of the graphs. Quite on the contrary, the graphs show that mitigation cases are clustered in some figures differently than the ones that group the majority of non-mitigating examples. Both figures also share a reduced number of instances labelled NA. These examples have not been analysed because they work on the deontic level (directives, advice). Since it has not been possible to analyse all examples, further research needs to develop a model that enables processing the deontic side of conversation as well.

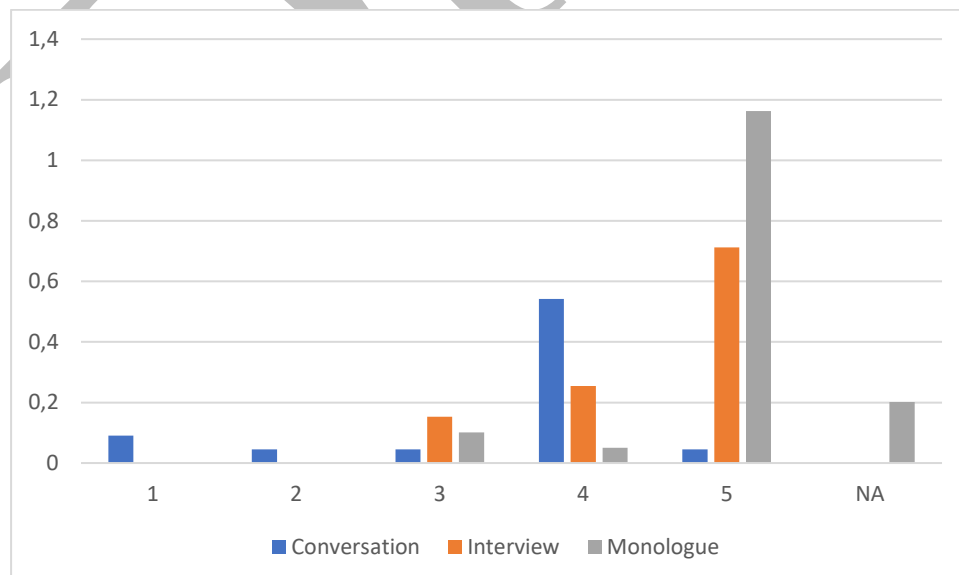
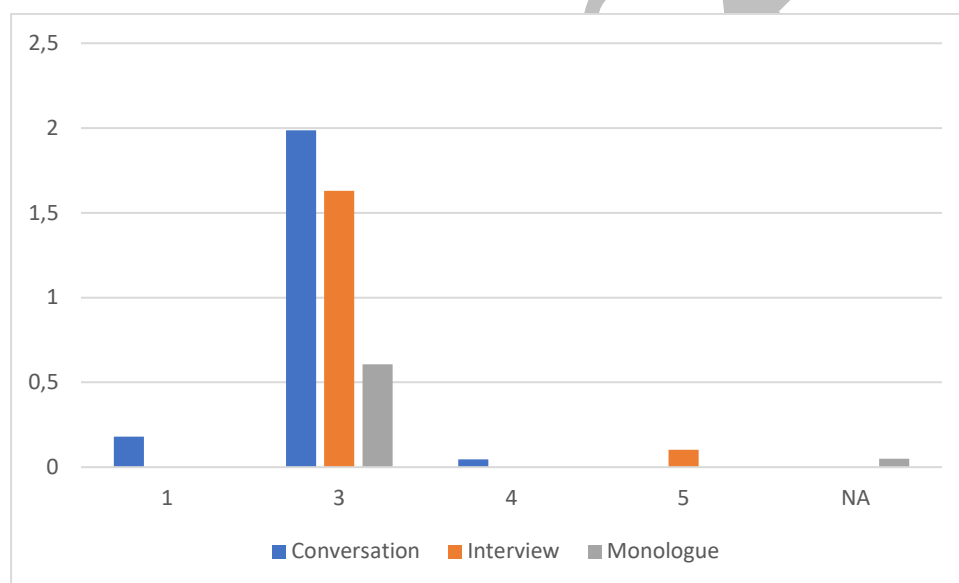


Figure 12. Distribution of epistemic figures with a mitigating value across genres

In Figure 12, epistemic figure 5 is the most productive mitigating epistemic figure, especially for the genres monologue and conversation. The genre conversation, on the

other hand, uses mostly epistemic figure 4 to mitigate. These differences regarding the use of figures can be assigned to the specificities of each genre. Monologue and interview favour an epistemic figure that is centred on protecting the speaker's face. In conversation, on the other hand, the figure most used is based on the prevention to potential damage to the hearer's face. Interaction in monologue and interview is more restricted than in conversation. It is, therefore, logical that almost all the mitigation occurrences are centred in the speaker's territory of information. Conversely, conversation amasses the majority of cases in which mitigation occurs in the hearer's territory. Since speakers have face-to-face real-time interlocutors (unlike monologues on YouTube) and the interaction is not regulated by one party (unlike interviews), more care is needed to protect potential damages to the hearer's face.



*Figure 13. Distribution of epistemic figures with a non-mitigating value across genres (per 1,000 words)*

Figure 13 collects most of the occurrences in epistemic figure 3. This epistemic figure shows epistemic access and primacy on the speaker making the intervention and epistemic dependency on the hearer. With this configuration, there is a very limited amount of mitigation associated with this epistemic figure. There is little room for face damage on the own speaker's face or on their interlocutor's, especially in storytelling sequences in which the speaker is presenting new information to the hearer (some storytelling sequences can, notwithstanding, be mitigating, see section 7). As far as frequencies go, the amount of examples in conversation, interview and monologue form a descending pattern. This also shows how mitigation is less frequent in conversation and gradually increases in interview and monologue, as has been shown in section 6.1.

## 7. What can epistemic figures tell us about mitigation? Two kinds of self-protection

The epistemic configurations previously shown (see section 5) have led to a fundamental distinction regarding the self-protection function of mitigation. In our data, two configurations affect exclusively the speaker producing the utterance in terms of epistemic access and primacy (configurations 3 and 5). These two representations are also believed to show two different kinds of self-protection. The main distinction lies in epistemic primacy. On the one hand, there is mitigation when speakers want to weaken the commitment with their utterances to avoid potential damages to their own faces, which is the canonical definition of the function of self-protection. On the other hand, there are some cases in which the speaker irremediably has epistemic primacy but wants to mitigate notwithstanding.

An example of the “traditional” sense of self-protection is (9). The speaker is explaining why she thinks living in the countryside is preferable to living in the city, even though the decision of one over the other is personal and, thus, it can be considered that it belongs within her epistemic primacy limits. However, the segment in which she argues why the countryside is a better option switches from the personal level to an account on a general level of why a rural life is better. In this segment, the speaker does not want to claim epistemic rights over the arguments she presents to consider why a life in the country is better. Quite on the contrary, she actively works to make it clear she is renouncing to those rights.

- (9)  
I: [...] pero preferirlo lo prefiero / el campo / porque<alargamiento/> <vacilación/> no sé / calidad de vida ¿no? / digo yo y más bonito salir / de tu casa y verlo todo<alargamiento/> <vacilación/> / la naturaleza  
[...] but I prefer it I prefer it the countryside because I don't know its quality of life right? I'd say that and it is more beautiful going outside your house and see everything nature  
PRESEEA, VALE\_M12\_038

The following two examples show mitigation when the speaker does have epistemic primacy. In (10), the speaker is talking about how she felt when she found out that a study claimed that intercourse, on average, lasted much less time than she had expected. As opposed to her description of the topic, in which the speaker is not an expert or has a close attachment, the speaker's reactions belong inherently to her and, therefore, she irremediably has epistemic primacy over them. Despite the epistemic primacy, she mitigates the assessment (*me he quedado un poco como en shock ¿no?*), even if it is hardly plausible to claim that she does not have the most epistemic rights on her own reactions.

- (10)  
H: el siguiente punto de la lista es cuánto dura el acto sexual / bueno en esta lista en concreto se estimula que dura quince minutos y que se destinan de diez a doce minutos en los preliminares y de tres a cinco minutos en el coito y bueno yo me he quedado un poco como en shock ¿no? aparte no sé me daba como curiosidad entender porque claro o sea me parece como que de tres a cinco minutos es muy poco

the next item on the list is how long sex lasts / well in this list concretely it is said that it lasts fifteen minutes and that ten to twelve minutes are devoted to foreplay and three to five to intercourse and well I was in shock right? well I don't know I was kind of curious to understand because well I mean I think that three to five minutes is too short

Herrejón\_Curiosex vol. 1

A similar case is evident in example 10. Here, C is talking about how a boy has written a message implying he likes her. In the passage, she describes the moment when this fact dawned on her. She feels the need to mitigate the assertion (*digo ¡coño! le molo a este tío [le molo ¿no?]*). In fact, there is a reformulation: first, she states it as a fact (*le molo a este tío*) introduced by what could be considered a change of state marker (*¡coño!*) (see Heritage 1984, García-Ramón 2018c), and right after this affirmation, she uses a weaker assertion (*le molo ¿no?*). Despite having epistemic primacy—because the story is about the speaker who has told it—she feels the need to mitigate the part in which claiming with total confidence to have a love interest can be seen as a vain attitude and, therefore, can potentially threaten the speaker's face.

(11)

200 C: [...] total que la leo↑ y ponía *de un admirador tuyo Mario López* // y yo// ¿*Mario López!*?/ digo [¿*este quién es/ tía!?* eso que no sabes quién es=]

so I read it and it said *from your admirer Mario López* and I was like *Mario Lopez?* I said *who is this guy?* you know when you don't know who the person is

201 A: [(RISAS)]

(laughter)

202 B: [(RISAS)]

(laughter)

203 C: = y yo *de un admirador tuyo* digo *¡coño! le molo a este tío [le molo ¿no?]=]*

and I from your admirer and I said fucking hell this guy likes me right?

Val.Es.Co Corpus 2.0, Conversation 20

The main difference between these two kinds of mitigation lies in the introduction of the concept of *epistemic primacy*. Traditionally, the main focus in the definition of self-protection has been put on the weakening of the speaker's commitment with the utterances produced. That is, speakers try to renounce any claim of epistemic primacy over the words they have uttered. However, the analysis of our data through the lens of epistemic (a)symmetries shows that speakers may also feel the need to mitigate to protect their own faces when the epistemic primacy undoubtedly belongs to them. The need to protect speakers' own faces can be done when speakers renounce their epistemic rights in contexts, if speakers are allowed to (see section 2), or when they have epistemic primacy. Understanding there are two similar—yet different in terms of knowledge management—sub-specifications of self-protection does not overcomplicate a working definition by defining its minor differences. Quite on the contrary, we believe this further development of the mitigation theory can help analysts better identify when a linguistic device is being used to mitigate an utterance.

## 8. Final remarks

The main objective of this paper is to analyse through the linguistic form *¿no?* how mitigation and knowledge (a)symmetries relate in different genres. This has provided results on the different elements analysed here: the discourse marker *¿no?*, genres, mitigation, knowledge (a)symmetries, and the intersection between knowledge (a)symmetries and mitigation. The conclusions drawn from this study can be divided into two major groups: the ones linked to the quantitative analysis and the ones developed from the qualitative analysis.

Regarding the qualitative analysis, the descriptions and graphic representations of the epistemic figures developed by García-Ramón (2018a, 2018b) have proven to be powerful tools for the analysis of mitigation. The flexibility of the model has also allowed us to expand it to new figures that have surfaced from the study of different interactive situations across genres. An approach taking into account the different shapes of knowledge (a)symmetries has also rendered results on the mitigation theory side. As has been shown, there seem to be two kinds of self-protection uses of mitigation, depending on whether the piece of information is located within the speaker's territory of information or outside it. We believe this distinction can be useful, since it can contribute to a more accurate definition and analysis of mitigation. As for the marker analysed, *¿no?* has proven to work to downgrade the epistemic rights speaker have over their assertions. This matches the findings already made by Heritage & Raymond (2012), Heritage (2012) and Sidnell (2012) for question tags, the functional equivalent of *¿no?* in English.

The quantitative analysis has rendered some outcomes that must be noted as well. In the first place, the high number of markers in a monologic corpus suggests that genres favour or constrict the degree of interactivity, but only to a certain extent. Sequences, along with genre, must also be taken into account. The distribution of the mitigation has also enabled looking further into the possible causes behind the differences in the distribution. Although further study is needed, taking into consideration the type of sequence seems to be a more powerful variable in predicting mitigation than considering the traits of genres only. Concerning the mitigation and the epistemic (a)symmetries data, when *¿no?* is used in epistemic configurations in which the speaker has epistemic primacy, it is more prone to have a non-mitigating value, whereas in cases in which the interlocutor has epistemic primacy or the speaker is actively renouncing to claim epistemic rights, mitigation is more likely to be used.

## Conflict of interest statement

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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