Negotiation of discourse moves: right periphery tags

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Abstract

In this paper I propose an analysis of the Spanish discourse marker *no?* as a form that allows the speaker to postpone commitment to a discourse move. This is achieved via *projected sets*, which are individualized for each discourse participant. I claim that all the functions observed in the previous literature and the non-propositional distribution of *no?* can be explained this way, without the need of different underlying factors. This analysis highlights the need to extend formal models of dialogue to include management of non-propositional content.

1 Introduction

The Spanish tag or discourse marker (DM) *no?* has attracted the attention of linguists that have focused on its sociolinguistic (Rodríguez Muñoz, 2009; García Vizcaíno, 2005) and functional properties (Móccero, 2010) . They all agree about two observations: (a) this marker seeks confirmation; (b) it allows the speaker to avoid confrontation by doing so. A prototypical example of *no?* seeking confirmation of a fact is exemplified in (1):[1]

(1) *Bueno, tú tienes un buen coche, no?*
well you have a good car no

'Well, you have a good car, [no]?'

This example is in line with analyses that propose that tags are ways to ask for the truth of a proposition. However, the distribution of *no?* poses a challenge for this idea, since it can appear with all clause-types, as is illustrated in Section 2. I propose an analysis that explains the distribution of *no?* across clause types. The analysis also explains how we can derive all observed functions from a basic core lexical meaning which interacts with the context of utterance.

2 Distribution

The layman description of the function of the tag *no?* in Spanish is that it turns any statement into a question, which is also the description of English tag questions. This description would restrict the distribution of the tag to declarative sentences, which is actually not the case. The literature on *no?* already remarks that although this marker can appear with declaratives, it is also quite often found accompanying non-declaratives checking the "opinion" of the addressee regarding a subjective evaluation (García Vizcaíno, 2005, 92).[2] In fact, *no?* can co-occur with all four types of clause types, like table (1) shows:[3]

Table 1: Summary of co-occurence of *no?* with different clause types.

Speech act type	Judgement	Example
DECLARATIVE	✓	(2)
INTERROGATIVE	✓	(3)
IMPERATIVE	✓	(4)
EXCLAMATIVE	✓	(5)

[1] The next example is taken from Rodríguez Muñoz (2009).

[2] According to her corpus–based study, this is the function of *no?* in 20.5% of the cases she identifies, whereas the function of *no?* as a verifier of the truth of the proposition takes up to a 40% of all cases.

[3] Examples (4), (6) and (9) are taken from (Rodríguez Muñoz, 2009). He uses the Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual (CREA), ['The Reference Corpus of Current Spanish'], developed by the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language. I have added the contexts which would trigger such a judgement.

(2) Two friends are chatting, and one starts talking about another friend's fancy car.
Bueno, tú tienes un buen coche, no?
well you have a good car no

'Well, you have a good car, [no]?'

(3) A and B are friends and cat-people; they are sitting in a pub with C, who is going on and on about how dogs are awesome. A says to B:
De qué está hablando, no?
about what is talking no

'What is he talking about, [no]?'

(4) A couple of friends are having some drinks at a patio, and it is getting cold:
Venga, vamos a otro sitio, no?
come.SUBJ go to another place no

'Come on, let's go somewhere else, [no]?'

(5) A couple of friends are having some drinks at a patio, and it is getting cold:
Oye, qué frío hace aquí!, no?
hear.IMP what cold makes here no

'Hey, it's freezing in here, [no]?'

Most analyses of similar particles, such as tag questions in English, claim that their function is to ask for confirmation of a proposition (Malamud and Stephenson, 2015; Reese and Asher, 2007; Cuenca, 1997). But then how should we make sense of examples such as (4), where the tag is attached to an imperative and not a proposition denoting utterance?

Moreover, not all declaratives accept the use of the tag. Commisives, such as promises and oaths, are not felicitous when accompanied by *no?*, as (6) illustrates:

(6) *#Te lo prometo, no?*
you it promise no

'I promise, [no]?'

The same judgement arises when the tag is attached to other types of performatives (7) and to expressives such as (8):

(7) *#Os declaro marido y mujer, no?*
you declare husband and wife no

'I declare you husband and wife, [no]?'

(8) A opens the door for a child. The child says:
#Muchas gracias, no?
many thanks no

'Thank you very much, [no]?'

The tag *no?* can appear with positive and negative statements, unlike other tags that contain a polarity particle, such as Englush RP-tags and French *non?* (Beyssade, 2012)[4]:

(9) a. *No es verdad, no?*
not is truth no

'It isn't true, [no]?'

b. *Es verdad, no?*
is truth no

'It's true, [no]?'

Given the distribution of the tag, we can conclude two things: (1) the core lexical meaning of *no?* cannot be tied to the notion of proposition, and (2) clause type is not restricting the distribution of the tag.

Another issue is the variety of functions that the literature has assigned to *no?*. The most widely discussed function is that of confirming, which is sometimes divided into confirmation of a fact or an opinion (García Vizcaíno, 2005).[5] The latter is especially true of taste predicates, which are felicitous accompanying the tag, as in (10):

(10) *Está riquísimo, no?*
is tasty.SUP no

'This is delicious, [no]?'

In section 4 I present an analysis the derives these different functions from a simple core lexical meaning of the tag. It will also explain why *no?*, is considered a politeness strategy, used to mitigate utterances that might be considered face-threatening.

[4] I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this work to me.

[5] Besides confirming, *no?* can also be used with a phatic or narrative function, to keep the addressee engaged (García Vizcaíno, 2005), similar to Canadian *eh* (Denis et al., 2016). I will not take these functions into consideration since, just as with the Canadian tag, intonation seems to differ.

3 Theoretical background

The distribution we have just seen raises two important questions:

1. How can we model non-propositional denoting content and its interaction with *no?*
2. Can we use the notion of commitment to explain the distribution of the tag?

In this section, I will discuss a way to model non-declarative content (Beyssade and Marandin, 2006), and a way to model postponement to commitment (Farkas and Bruce, 2009; Malamud and Stephenson, 2015).

3.1 Speech acts in gameboard

Inspired by the taxonomy presented in Zaefferer (2001), Beyssade and Marandin (2006) (B&M) claim that different speech act types are linked with different commitments. The main divide between speech acts comes in the split between non-expressives and expressives (which B&M equate with exclamations). In their analysis, this corresponds to the difference between CONVERSATIONAL MOVE TYPES (CMT): non-expressives require an interactive move, i.e. be accepted in both the speaker's (S) and the addressee's (A) commitment sets, whereas exclamatives are associated with a commitment to only the speaker, and are therefore non-interactive.

What does this mean for the dialogue gameboard (DGB), where all moves and changes in a dialogue are registered and kept by each participant? B&S adopt a model inspired by Game Theory and works such as Ginzburg (2012; Ginzburg (1996). From the work of this last author they keep the elements listed in (11) from (a)-(c), and add the ones from (d)-(f):

(11) a. SHARED GROUND (SG), which is a partially ordered set of *propositions* that have been accepted by all participants. It can be incremented by uttering an assertion.

b. QUESTION UNDER DISCUSSION (QUD), a partially ordered set of *questions*. It can be incremented by uttering a question.

c. TO-DO-LIST (TDL) for each participant. It is an ordered list of "descriptions of situations the actualization of which depends on the Addressee and towards which the Speaker is positively oriented" Beyssade and Marandin (2006)55. TDL(A) can be incremented by uttering a directive.

d. CALL-ON-ADDRESSEE (COA), which registers the type, as well as the content, of S's call on Addressee, the element that elicits a response from the addressee. It contains only one element, unlike SG, QUD, and TDL, which has to be updated each time a new utterance is made.

e. LATEST MOVE contains the very last conversational move.

f. SPEAKER-ONLY-COMMITMENT (SP-ONLY-CMT) is a set that contains commitments that pertain only to the speaker, such as exclamations. Since exclamatives only concern S's own opinion, they do not require the commitment of the addressee.

What is important for my own analysis of *no?* is that each speech act type is linked to a different type of commitment, that derives form the different semantic content types from each syntactic type. A summary is shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Syntactic and semantic content types Beyssade and Marandin (2006, 41).

Syntactic type	**Semantic content type**
Declarative	Proposition
Interrogative	Question (propositional abstract)
Imperative	Outcome
Exclamative	Fact

Assertives commit the speaker to a proposition p and call for an update of the discourse gameboards by adding p to the SG. Questions commit the speaker to an issue and call for an update of the gameboard by adding a propositional abstract q to the QUD. Directives commit the speaker to an outcome o and call for an update of the gameboard by adding o to the TDL(A). Finally, exclamatives are different from the rest of speech act types in so far as they are only concerned about the speakers's commitment and don't try to update the gameboard by requesting anything from the addressee.

3.2 Postponing commitment

Farkas and Bruce (2009) (F&B) propose a scoreboard structure for discourse that revolves around a TABLE. This, and all other elements of their model are defined in (12) and illustrated in Table 3:

(12) a. The TABLE is how F&B rename the Questions Under Discussions (QUD) proposed by Ginzburg (1996). The items on the Table are syntactic objects paired with their denotations, and form a stack. One of the forces that drives conversations is emptying the Table, that is, reaching a stable state.

b. DISCOURSE COMMITMENTS (DC) for each participant (following Gunlogson 2008), which are sets of propositions to which each participant has committed.

c. The COMMON GROUND (cg) contains all the propositions that have been accepted by all participants, and also a set of background propositions. The second force that drives conversations is to increase the *cg*.

d. The PROJECTED SET *(ps)* is a superset of the *cg*, composed of future common grounds.

Differences in how many future common grounds are projected in the *ps* explain the differences between assertions and polar questions. Whereas assertions only project one future *cg*, namely the one in which *p* is added to the *cg*, polar questions project a non-singleton set of CGS, since the input on the Table is not a single *p* but a non-singleton set.

Table 3: Conversational scoreboard by Farkas and Bruce (2009).

A	**Table**	**B**
DC_A	*S*	DC_B
Common Ground *cg*	Projected Set *ps*	

Malamud and Stephenson (2015) (M&S) modify this model to include projected sets for each discourse participant's commitments, as shown in Table (4).[6] They defend this modification based on three types of evidence in English: reverse-polarity tags (RP-tags), same-polarity tags (SP-tags), and non-interrogative rising intonation (NI-rise).

Table 4: Conversational scoreboard as seen by Malamud and Stephenson (2015). Elements with an asterisk (*) are projected.

DC_A	$DC*_A$	DC_B	$DC*_B$
Table *S*			
CG		CG*	

M&S's main evidence comes from the differences in distribution between the three aforementioned structures and predicates that undoubtedly ask for only one of the participants' judgments, that is, only one of the discourse commitment sets is at play. These are taste predicates and vague scalar predicates. M&S argue that taste predicates only access S's discourse commitments, since they rely on the subjective evaluation of a judge, who by default is the speaker following Stephenson (2007). In the case of vague scalar predicates, S may want to categorize an item that is hard to define in terms of a previously established scale, and therefore the final say needs to be agreed upon: S cannot unilaterally change the CG.

This analysis allows to formalize the confirmation-seeking functions of English tags and also Spanish *no?*. However, it cannot capture the distribution of the tag in non-declarative cases. In the next section, I combine the strengths of these two models for my analysis of Spanish *no?*.

4 Analysis

My main hypothesis is that *no?* marks two things:

1. The underlying function of the DM is to ask for confirmation of a discourse move

2. It does so by placing the discourse move in a projected set

The conjunction of these two points and the differences in how different utterances update the conversation explain the different functions that have been attributed to the DM in the literature: for example, when the DM is uttered after an imperative, it allows the addressee not to comply

[6] This is my own visual version of their model. I have tried to make the two conversational scoreboards as similar as possible.

with the command, and therefore contributes to its politeness effect. It also explains why, when attached to a declarative, it can work both as a confirmational of truth of proposition and as a confirmational of adequacy of the discourse move, the latter serving a narrative function (confirmational in the sense of Wiltschko and Heim (2016)).

These points show the influences of the two models: B&M highlight the importance of different types of speech acts and the commitments they introduce, while F&B and M&S focused on the importance of having projected sets. Before other types of speech acts are discussed, I will show what the difference is between a declarative sentence with and without the DM *no?*.

When a speaker A utters a bare declarative, ASSERT(p) is placed on the TABLE and in the DC sets of speaker A: there is a commitment to the truth of the proposition asserted. This is shown in Table 5. When a declarative is followed by *no?*, the whole discourse move is again put on the TABLE, but this time there is no immediate commitment to the truth of p: ASSERT(p) is placed in the projected set of A's DC. This is shown in Table 6:[7]

Table 5: Conversational scoreboard after a declarative is uttered by A.

DC_A ASSERT(*p*)	DC^*_A	DC_B	DC^*_B
Table *S* ASSERT(p)			
CG	CG* *p*		

Table 6: Conversational scoreboard after a declarative+no? is uttered by A.

DC_A	DC^*_A ASSERT(*p*)	DC_B	DC^*_B
Table *S* ASSERT(p)			
CG	CG* *p*		

The next step involves the addressee: if she doesn't oppose the speaker's move (either explicitly or implicitly), ASSERT(p) will make it into the Speaker's current discourse commitments, and *p* will move from the CG* to the current CG.

One of the main goals of the paper is to allow the formalization of non-propositional content in the model. This is important because different utterances update the conversation differently. Table 7 shows how this analysis would formalize the utterance of an imperative by Speaker A: COMMAND(o) is placed on the TABLE, as well as in the current DC of the speaker. But at the same time, it is placed on the addressee's (Speaker B) current DC as well, since it is a requirement to update their To-Do-List (following Portner (2004)).

Table 7: Conversational scoreboard after an imperative is uttered by A.

DC_A COMMAND(*o*)	DC^*_A	DC_B *o*	DC^*_B
Table *S* COMMAND(o)			
CG	CG*		

This is not the case when an imperative is followed by *no?*. Although COMMAND(o) is placed on the TABLE as well, it is not placed in the current DC of the speaker but in its projected set: the speaker is not committing to an exhortation, but asking for confirmation of whether that move would be acceptable. At the same time, the speaker does not place the *outcome* in the current DC of the addressee but again in the projected sets, as a future possible move if there is no disagreement. This is what gives this DM its politeness flavour, especially when accompanying an imperative: it allows the speaker to give the addressee the chance to refuse to comply by not requiring an immediate update of the To-Do-List. This is shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Conversational scoreboard after a declarative+*no?* is uttered by A.

DC_A	DC^*_A COMMAND(*o*)	DC_B	DC^*_B *o*
Table *S* COMMAND(o)			
CG	CG*		

With questions, the use of the tag marks that it is the whole act of asking a question (the whole discourse move) that is put on the TABLE, as well as in the projected discourse set of the speaker. Once again, if the addressee does not complain about this development in the dialogue, the speaker will commit to making the move. Whereas just before we saw how the tag turns an imperative into a suggestion, in this case it turns a polar question into a sort of rhetorical polar question, in the sense that it

[7] It is especially difficult to distinguish between placing ASSERT(p) or just *p* on the TABLE when a declarative is not followed by *no?*; although I have decided to use a parallel analysis to other types of speech acts, I am aware that this needs to be developed.

does not require the addressee to choose between one of the alternatives but to the act of asking the question. This is shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Conversational scoreboard after an interrogative+*no?* is uttered by A.

DC_A	DC^*_A ASK $\{p, \neg p\}$	DC_B	DC^*_B
Table *S* ASK {p, ¬p}			
CG		CG*	

As it is shown, the different functions that *no?* has been said to serve can be pin down to one underlying function, namely that of placing linguistic units in projected sets. The different functions can be derived from a) the differences in update from different utterances, and b) context.

5 Conclusions

In this paper I have proposed an analysis of the Spanish tag/DM *no?* that would explain its different functions with a sole underlying meaning. I base this analysis on two previous pieces of research: how different speech acts differ in terms of the update of a conversation, and how speakers can avoid committing to a proposition. I combined both and argued that *no?* signals that the speaker is using projected sets (that is, future moves) instead of current sets, thus allowing her to postpone a present commitment to a discourse move. The differences in function (politeness, interaction marker, etc.) result from the different ways the utterances to which the DM attaches to update the conversation.

This analysis is not without challenges: with declaratives, it is unclear how speakers know whether it is committing to the truth of the proposition that is being postponed or committing to the whole utterance. A more fine-grained distinction of declaratives and the role of intonation may shed light on this matter. Future research will address these questions and make the model more accurate, including other DMs as well.

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