

# **The Dictionary of Spanish Discourse Markers for Students of Spanish as a Second Language**

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## **Introduction and Main Goal of the Project.**

The linguistic term 'discourse marker' has been defined in the last few decades in a variety of ways, leading to a discrepancy among authors to indicate exactly which elements should be included in this designation. Even current studies on discourse markers frequently discuss this disagreement:

The study of discourse markers does not constitute a unitary approach. Significant disagreements can be found among scholars regarding the linguistic units which must be considered discourse markers, the dimensions involved in their study, or even the distributional features of the class (Pons Bordería 2006: 77).

There are, however, some accepted assumptions about the meaning of these elements: they organize the discourse and help the listeners infer the speakers' intentions, they are 'sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk' (Schiffrin 1987). Although in English they were analyzed three decades ago (Fraser 1990, Levinson 1983), in Spanish linguistics these elements have not been studied in depth until very recently (Loureda and Acín 2010), and they are currently a trend in this field, but there is still one area in which they have been particularly ignored: Spanish as a Second Language. Many textbooks fail to include the pragmatic element, discourse markers are generally ignored in the second language class (Hellermann and Vergun 2007) and the few studies that analyze discourse markers in this context have come about very recently (Martí Sánchez 2008, Martí Sánchez and Fernández Gómiz 2013). The Dictionary of Discourse Markers for Students of Spanish (Holgado Lage 2014) can become a tool which will help students of Spanish learn and successfully use these expressions.

## **Previous Work.**

Although this dictionary offers an initial approach to the combination of three different fields (discourse markers, lexicography and Spanish as an L/2), there is literature combining two of these three fields that served as a base for the creation of this project.

## **Spanish as an L/2 and Lexicography.**

As with any language studied worldwide as a second language, there are general dictionaries written in Spanish adapted to be understood by learners of the language (González 2002, Maldonado 2002, Seco 1999). However, when analyzing these tools, it is clear that the pragmatic element is generally overlooked (Holgado Lage 2009: 26). Many discourse markers are not registered, especially the ones that are formed by more than one word (e.g. *o sea, por otra parte...*) and swear words. This is due to the fact that these are general dictionaries that have to cover a large number of elements, but they do not offer enough information to a student who would want to learn more discursive expressions.

## **Discourse Markers and Lexicography.**

Almost the opposite occurs when studying the three existing dictionaries of discourse markers in Spanish, all of them recently published (Briz and colleagues 2004, Fuentes Rodríguez 2009, Santos Río 2003). These dictionaries, particularly the last two, provide too much information, to the point that most students of Spanish, except for the most advanced ones, would not be able to fully comprehend the content of the entries. In the case of Santos Río (2003), only a specialist in Spanish linguistics could understand the extension of the exhaustive analysis of the particles that the author performs. The one who could be useful to this particular user is the Dpde (Briz and colleagues 2004-), however, due to the limited number of discourse markers registered<sup>1</sup>, the creation of a bigger dictionary was justified.

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<sup>1</sup> This dictionary has about 100, but the Dictionary of Discourse Markers for Students of Spanish registers about 700.

## **Discourse Markers and Spanish as in L/2.**

As pointed out in the introduction of this paper, the literature on discourse markers in the setting of Spanish as a second language is very recent but promising. Martí (2008, 2013) has worked on how to teach these elements inside the classroom and also outside the classroom, and how to adapt the work that we already have in Spanish to the particular needs of the students. The Dictionary of Discourse Markers can help in broadening this field.

## **Methodology.**

Once the need for this dictionary was proven, a methodology of work was designed. The main question to answer before starting was: What discourse markers should be included in the dictionary? Considering that depending on the author, the inclusion and exclusion of elements tend to differ, making a final list of expressions was not a simple task. Based on the previous dictionaries of discourse markers (§2.2.), the list of expressions listed by the *Plan Curricular* (Instituto Cervantes 2006/07) and the frequency of use of the markers as shown in two corpora<sup>2</sup>, I created a list of about 700 discourse markers for the dictionary.

Afterwards, a decision had to be made about what information to include in every entry. Some of the sections were obviously necessary (Kaalep and Mikk 2008), like a clear definition, which was also very challenging (Holgado Lage 2014). Other sections were debatable, but looking at other dictionaries of Spanish as a Foreign Language (§2.1.) helped in deciding what to register. The final design of the entry consists of: item, type of word, label, definition, examples, use and culture, similar discourse markers, level and function. Some of the information that was finally not included in the dictionary is, for instance, bilingual information, as the goal of the dictionary is to be useful for any student of Spanish without giving an advantage to the speakers of a particular language. Also the format used at all times is the one of a classic dictionary so I decided not to include activities that would complement the information, but a little handbook with activities specifically designed for the student that wants to practice while using the dictionary (García Sanz 2011) could be included in future projects.

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<sup>2</sup> The two corpora chosen were Corpus del Español by Davies (<http://www.corpusdelespanol.org/>) and CREA by the Real Academia Española (<http://corpus.rae.es/creanet.html>).

## Organization of the Dictionary.

While the sections of the entry have already been listed, it is important to mention exactly what each one of them involves to fully understand their extent and in what sense they are specifically designed for students of Spanish as a second language. Basing the information on a sample entry (figure 1), I will explain the importance of each one of the subdivisions.

**A LO MEJOR:** Locución adverbial

Informal/oral

Se utiliza para expresar duda.

- – *¿Necesitas ayuda con el crucigrama?*
- *A lo mejor, pero primero dame unos minutos más.*
- *A lo mejor volvemos el año que viene.*

A diferencia de otros marcadores de duda, cuando aparece seguido de oración se utiliza siempre el indicativo. Es uno de los marcadores de duda que más se utiliza en el ámbito informal peninsular, por lo que conviene conocerlo.

Otros marcadores similares: *Acaso, es posible, igual, lo mismo, puede (ser), quizá(s), tal vez*

Nivel: INTERMEDIO. Función DUDA

Figure 1. Example taken from The Dictionary of Discourse Markers

## Item and Type of Word.

As seen in the example (figure 1), *a lo mejor* is the lexical item in this entry. The items in the dictionary are organized alphabetically starting by the first letter of the first word. Immediately after, there is a classification by type of word, which can be expected to be useful mainly for advanced students with knowledge of grammar.

## Labels.

Labels tend to be confusing in many general dictionaries of Spanish as an L/2 (Dacosta Cea 2004, Holgado Lage 2009). For that reason, in the Dictionary of Discourse Markers, labels

are kept as simple as possible<sup>3</sup>. The level of formality of a word is expressed in the scale *formal/informal/vulgar*. The last one is used only for swear words. In addition to these three categories, there is a distinction between *oral speech/written speech*, if the marker is used mainly in one type of speech. The marker *a lo mejor*, which expresses doubt, is used mostly in the oral and informal speech. Only a few entries have a label for *uncommon*, for those cases in which the discourse marker is not used frequently but it was still included in the dictionary<sup>4</sup>.

### **Definition.**

Defining discourse markers is not an easy task. There are studies about the challenges of defining function words (Holgado Lage 2014, Martín Zorraquino 2005), and some of these discourse markers had only been defined in dictionaries for linguistics specialists. According to Seco (1987), in the case of function words, what is offered as information about them is not a real ‘definition’ but an ‘explanation’ of how they work, which differs from the definitions of content words. In the Dictionary of Discourse Markers, the definition is written in one sentence and it usually refers to the main function of the expression analyzed. In the example, ‘it is used to express doubt’ would be the translation for that sentence.

### **Examples.**

While there is controversy about the influence of examples when decoding a word in dictionaries of second language (Kaalep and Mikk 2008), I considered that, when dealing with discourse markers, seeing the expression used in a sentence can be essential. It might not only be the first time that the user is exposed to it, but also there are other things to take into consideration: its place in the sentence, if it is followed by the indicative or the subjunctive, etc. There are usually between one and three examples in each entry, many times created specifically

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<sup>3</sup> Although the labels can be confusing, it is important to remember that they are also very helpful to the users (Dacosta Cea 2004).

<sup>4</sup> The dictionary does not include a large number of discourse markers that are not commonly used, but in some cases, due for instance to a lack of synonyms that could be used instead, some markers that are not frequent are registered.

to show the use of the expressions, and sometimes taken from a corpus<sup>5</sup>, when there was an instance in which the use of the discourse marker was clearly exemplified.

### **Use and Culture.**

Arguably the most important section of each entry, it deals with the specific characteristics of the marker that a student of Spanish should know in order to use it correctly. In the given example, ‘differs from other markers of doubt because it is always followed by the indicative. It is one of the most used markers to express doubt in informal peninsular Spanish, so it is recommended to know it’. Extent of use, mood selection, position in the sentence, area where it is most used, emphasis on the level of formality, similarities and differences with similar markers ... Those are some of the aspects mentioned in this paragraph, and the ones that appear in each entry depend entirely on the particular behavior of the marker.

### **Similar Markers.**

Although sometimes we refer to similar markers by using the word ‘synonyms’, it is very rare that two markers are completely synonymous, and there are several studies on Spanish discourse markers that apparently have the same meaning, but show small differences in use (e.g. Domínguez García 2001). There is a section in each entry in which some of these similar discourse markers are listed, in order to provide the standard user with some new expressions, but it is clearly recommended that the entries for these should be read and understood before using them.

### **Level and Function.**

Finally, every entry refers to a level and a function. All the discourse markers are listed in three levels following the standards of the Instituto Cervantes (2006/07), and divided into functions, the most useful way to distribute the markers considering the needs of the users. It is also easy to find a marker by looking into the level or the function lists at the end of the

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<sup>5</sup> Corpus del Español (<http://www.corpusdelespanol.org/>) and CREA (<http://corpus.rae.es/creanet.html>).

dictionary. The entry that serves as an example, *a lo mejor*, fits into the intermediate level and the function of doubt.

### **Conclusions and Further Applications.**

To sum up, this dictionary, the result of the combination of the fields of discourse markers, lexicography and Spanish as an L/2, includes and defines about 700 discourse markers and it is specifically designed for students of Spanish. Each entry explains in detail how the discourse marker works in native speech so that learners can understand it and start using it. However, it is a tool that can be useful also for teachers when preparing classes or when deciding how to include the pragmatic element, many times overlooked, in their lesson plans. The dictionary can also be studied by other linguists as there is a new organization of markers, focusing more on the main function than on pragmatic differentiations. This dictionary aims to be a fundamental resource for the teaching of Spanish discourse markers to students of all levels.

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