

## **LA VERDAD AS A DISCOURSE MARKER IN SPANISH EVERY-DAY CONVERSATION**

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**Abstract:** Research on discourse markers, even within the same language, will always result in a study that covers a communicative sphere (speech community, discourse type, speaker and hearer characteristics, environment, etc.) while allowing for the comparison and contrast of their performance in other contexts. In this paper, we try to offer an interpretation of the use of the discourse marker *la verdad* in modern Spanish. Results lead us to believe in the coordinative properties of this marker during conversation and also in its discursive meaning though it may be noted as a general feature that it does not convey itself social and or expressive meaning but it can be noticed that there are salient social categories, like sex, which constrain its use.

**Keywords:** Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistics, Discourse Markers, Pragmatics.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Interactional Sociolinguistics and Discourse Analysis offer various investigative alternatives of the diverse elements that shape the performance of linguistic units during the process of communicative interaction (Myhill, 1992; Stubbs, 1987; Levinson, 1989; Coulthard, 1992; Narbona, 1991; Serrano, 1996c). As disciplines that analyze the study of language in use, they pay attention to frequently appearing units, usually devoid of lexical meaning, that do not add information but rather carry out a framing and differentiating function in speech acts, called *discourse markers*. Conversational structure should display the communicative properties of cohesion and coherence (Lyons, 1981:200). These elements contribute to conversation, endowing it with *discursive* meaning. Thus units such as *ah*, *eh*, *bueno*, *pues*, *no*, *sabes*, etc. form part of this conversational category. Each element possesses a distinctive cohesive function, depending on the context in which it appears and how speakers -according to their cultural backgrounds-make use of them. Harris, one of the first linguists

to correlate linguistic utterances with discourse type, advocated this type of analysis in conjunction with cultural factors (1952:1) as well as with the functions that the elements perform within it (1952:30). Later van Dijk (1980:10), critiquing Harris's attempt to systematize discursive schemata, added that these components should be studied as a part of pragmatic coherence.

The analysis of discourse markers should be carried out in accordance with two fundamental questions:

- The way in which speakers arrange forms, meanings, and actions during the course of conversations, being aware of what speakers have in mind to say while reflecting on the coherence of the discourse.
- The way in which the aforementioned coherence provides cohesion to the communicative act and promotes understanding and interaction with the hearer.

Discourse structure is organized according to the use of these elements that provide specific, regular functions to contexts (Schiffrin, 1987:30) and that reveal cohesive meaning in agreement with speech acts and the environment (Tannen, 1993:22). Discourse markers are defined as "sequentially different units that distribute and separate speech units" (Schiffrin, 1987:31), with *speech units* being understood as those units having a certain value within discourse: sentences, sequences, propositions, tonic units, texts, subtexts, etc., and also as "particles that do not add information to the utterance and that frequently arise in the form of a question, completing the discourse on a cognitive level that originates from its fundamental meaning, after having lost its grammatical function" (Vincent y Sankoff, 1992:205).

Broadly speaking, the study of discourse markers constitutes a contribution to discourse analysis, helping to consolidate behavioral patterns and communicative organization while keeping within the specific parameters which constitute speech acts and the environment in which they are produced. As Schiffrin points out (1987:47-8), choosing the features of discourse markers is not easy due to the broad methodology of discourse analysis and the large number of contexts-linguistic as well as extralinguistic-in which they appear. Because of this, research on discourse markers, even within the same language, will always result in a study that covers a communicative sphere (speech community, discourse type, speaker and hearer characteristics, environment, etc.) while allowing for the comparison and contrast of their performance in other contexts.

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND CORPUS

In this paper, we try to offer an interpretation of the use of the discourse markers *la verdad* in modern Spanish. Spontaneous conversations of 32 native speakers from the metropolitan area of Santa Cruz de Tenerife (Spain) act as a foundation. It is well known that the manner in which data is collected can greatly influence the linguistic elements which one wants to study and that the effects of the *observer's paradox* should be minimized as much as possible (Labov, 1972/1983). For this reason, we have used a data collection method that allows for the greatest possible expressivity and spontaneity of the interlocutors. Interview techniques and strategies of conversational interaction were introduced. It was made certain that the interviewer was someone close to the interviewee (family member, friend, person of the same age, social milieu, or gender) in order to achieve the highest level of integration and communicability between them. The interviews were performed in places that were either comfortable, well-known, or familiar to the interviewers with the hope that the surroundings would be the most relaxed possible. Conversations began with an open topic, chosen by the

interviewee, to which the interviewer steadily made refinements and acknowledgments or added questions in an effort to reduce the initial tension. Following this, the interviewer asked some previously prepared questions about current events. The objective of these questions was to produce an effect of conversational dialogue, which would certainly bring about a greater use of discourse markers. In any case, the interviewer attempted to adapt his discourse and speech to those of the person being interviewed in order to prevent the latter from altering or copying his manner of speaking.

We believe that, except in the case of some material that was left out, spontaneity and naturalness was achieved in the interviews. Similarly, we can regard the language of the speakers as an expression of their workaday existence. Interviews were carried out with 16 men and 16 women. They were selected by random sample, making sure that there were representatives from every social category as well as from diverse sociocultural levels (the union of income level and profession) and ages: first (20-34 years old), second (35-55), and third generations (55 and up). With the objective of comparing the use of discourse markers between different social groups, we divided them up equally. As a result, 8 informers from each level (lower, lower-middle, upper-middle, and upper) were interviewed, with 11 being drawn from the first and second age group and 10 from the third.

Issuing from a study like the one we have carried out with discourse markers is the fact that forming a social stratification of natural discourse elements is no simple matter. This is because they derive from circumstances that depend on the context, individual communicative strategies, and unique discourse construction. In these cases, social factors in themselves do not provide the relevant interpretation; rather, they should be coupled with coordinating effects during interaction which are produced in speech acts. In an equivalent move one would depart from the discourse in order to include-if necessary-social circumstances. Our analysis will be qualitative and quantitative for those aspects which require it. The statistical analysis was carried out with the VARBRUL 2S program.

### 3. *LA VERDAD* AS DISCOURSE MARKER

Conversational structure is provided by particular connective and cohesive elements that are strongly conditioned by and, in their own way, condition the situational meaning of the locutionary act. This supposes their actualization in each communicative instance. The case of *la verdad* represents the realization of assertive content of the segment in which it is placed, thus actualizing its significance in a meaningful direction. In our corpus *la verdad*, acting as a discourse marker, appears in two kinds of contexts:

#### A) INTRODUCING A RESPONSE

(1) A: ¿Tú crees que el fracaso de algunos grupos musicales se debe a las drogas?

B: Pues *la verdad* es que sí, *la verdad* es que sí, porque yo he visto antes de un concierto preparándose en el camerino y verles encima de la mesa preparando su...su...sus drogas y tal.

(2) A: ¿Crees que este Gobierno ya no tiene credibilidad?

B: Pues, en mi opinión, *la verdad*, el gobierno ha perdido bastante credibilidad debido a los últimos escándalos.

## B) SUPPORTING INFORMATION

(3) Esto es una cuestión que la he comentado con amigas con las que fui de...fui a ese viaje, y la verdad es que difiere bastante de nuestro sistema ya que al ser un país del Este tiene otra cultura, otra forma de pensar.

(4) Este país va directamente al caos, aunque, *la verdad*, me gustaría tener esperanza.

In both cases *la verdad* provides a kind of assertive cohesion and coherence; this is to say, it is the vehicle that exhibits the informative intention of the speaker and his wish to introduce, either in the response or during the entire sequence, his affirmative implication. This is a result of the grammaticalization of the lexical characteristics which configure this segment; it is obvious that the meaning of *verdad* proceeds from the assertive force which were are talking about. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that the lexical erosion which it has undergone is what permits it to have purely discursive meaning. It retains no syntactical function nor does it possess any meaning beyond the orational. Moreover, it has been thought that the discursive function of markers also comes from a prior interrogative form (in the case of ¿*verdad*?) (Oliveira and Tavares, 1992:236). This, however, may not be its most interesting characteristic because it reveals neither the grammaticalization process of these elements nor the movement from a syntactic and lexical function to a discursive one, which is always derived from the former. In any case, as these authors point out (1992:248), the study of discourse markers uncovers important relationships between lexical entries and grammar as well as showing how both parts interact in order to configure constant discursive realizations.

Therefore, in Schiffrin's terms (1987:55), *la verdad* is a coherence option and its meaning is clearly expressive. It is also of interest to determine under what contextual conditions this expressive force appears and why it is used in questions which we hope to answer here. The form, original meaning of *verdad*, and discursive and conversational action determine the meaningful use of this marker, helping to shape a unique function that is not comparable to other ones. This function is set up within a stylistic frame where the speaker attempts to express his position with respect to the question that is posed to him (introducing a response) or in relation to that which is enunciated (supporting information).

The the first function (*introducing a response*), it adds veracity or credibility to the position taken, inasmuch as all responses imply choosing and taking a position regarding the question being asked. Nevertheless, the naturalness of the question and the response (or of the conversational interaction) condition the appearance of this assertive marker. We can therefore record a greater use of *la verdad* when the speaker who is responding does not seem to identify his position with that of the person who is asking the question or when the response is opposite of that which was expected. Thus, by means of *la verdad*, the discursive coherence and cohesion necessary to maintain the level of communicative negotiation is introduced. We know that the lack of ideological, cultural, social, and even contextual (when two speakers do not share the same opinion about something) proximity favors the need for negotiation (Dubois y Horvath, 1992:34). We are now going to study some examples of this negotiability. In (5) the question is formulated in the form of a doubt, to which the speaker responds contrarily, reaffirming his position:

(5) A: ¿Dudas sobre la realidad de un concierto en directo?

B: Pues...la verdad es que...a veces me lo he planteado...lo que es dudar, dudar, dudar en sí...pues exactamente no lo sé...pero sí que me lo ha planteado.



Something similar occurs in (6). The question receives a response which is opposite of that which is expected:

- (6) A: ¿Y sobre la música clásica?  
B: La verdad, sobre la música clásica no puedo decir mucho porque no es mi fuerte.

In (1) and (2) we are also able to observe the assertive coherence which introduces the marker *la verdad* as an introduction to a response that shapes the assertive position of the speaker.

The second function (*supporting information*) will not be described according to the parameters of negotiability (although perhaps this can be of assistance as well), but rather in relation to the need of maintaining this assertive coherence during the utterance, usually at the time when a position is taken:

- (7) La música que está de moda ahora es una música...como muy repetitiva, una música con sonido a cacharro...a mí *la verdad* no me gusta.  
(8) La mayoría de los profesores eran inexpertos, eran gente que acababa de salir de la Universidad y se ponían a darnos clase sobre cómo enseñar, entonces, *la verdad*, yo considero que en estos casos hay mucho que decir.

As seen, (3) and (4) are also cases in which *la verdad* provides assertive coherence to the information that is presented.

In summary, in order to answer the questions posed previously, we can consider that the discursive conditions in which this marker appears are related to the desire to reaffirm assertive content (through the grammaticalization of its original lexical content), whether as a form of informative negotiability in responses, or as a way of determining the position taken by the speaker during the length of the discourse. Each case reflects how the speaker molds his utterances according to his communicative needs, which are either conditioned by the interlocutor or by other characteristics (cultural or social) that will also be discussed here. It is clear that this form is most easily inserted into a type of discourse which is spontaneous, commonplace, non-narrative, interactional, and, above all, conversational in which the speaker and hearer are able to interact according to certain shared social patterns and where the contextual frame is in accordance with the characteristics that Tannen refers to as "expectation structures" (1993:16); this is to say that the speaker and hearer should share a cultural code that allows them understand and accept one another's norms. Von Savigny holds that, within a given speech community, linguistic conduct is suitable when it fits in with the agreed upon interpretations of that community (1988:12). Van Dijk makes a similar claim (1980a:145; 1980b:241) when he affirms that linguistic systems are conventional systems that are in large measure controlled by the structure of societal interaction. It is this functional view which accentuates the predominately social role of language.

Consequently, after having determined that the use of this discourse marker is not only significant within the study of discourse but also within sociolinguistics -relative to the linguistic community in which it used- we are now ready to discuss its social influence.

In order to carry out a satisfactory analysis of the elements of social temperament that could be encouraging or limiting the use of this discourse marker, it is necessary to begin from the proper linguistic contexts; it is certain, then, that dissimilar locutionary or conversational

performance cannot be compared. In this case, we have made sure that the discourse type (interviews) provides the appropriate context so that speakers' characteristics can be analyzed according to regular patterns. The assessment that follows is therefore based on the discourse type that we have described earlier.

We have obtained a total of 224 examples of *la verdad* of which 134 are *introducing a response* and 90 are *supporting information*. These figures are understandable when one considers that the discourse style (interviews) favors the appearance of the former type. Regarding this point, we can observe that the distribution among the social categories being studied is rather uniform, notwithstanding considerations of gender and the lowest sociocultural levels (Table 1):

Table 1. Percents and probabilities of *la verdad* as introducing a response

	<b>Apps</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Prob</b>
Men	29/95	31%	23
Women	105/129	81%	77
1 <sup>a</sup> gen. (20-34)	27/52	52%	48
2 <sup>a</sup> gen (34-55)	67/104	64%	49
3 <sup>a</sup> gen (55---)	40/68	59%	52
Low	33/42	79%	66
Middle low	28/46	61%	58
Middle high	48/93	52%	35
High	25/43	58%	40

Just as the data suggests, women and the lowest sociocultural levels (lower and lower-middle) represent the social groups where we find the greatest number of speakers who use *la verdad* as a discourse marker that introduces an assertive response which is not expected by and possibly contrary to the position of the interlocutor; for this reason, there is a desire of reaffirmation on behalf of the former. Hence, these groups do not tend to express their responses in a direct manner, but rather they make use of this linguistic resource in order to present information in a way that is less coarse.

Although this data is revealing in and of itself of the forms of expression of the sectors which traditionally have been the most sociolinguistically representative, it would be of interest to perform a cross-data analysis in order to verify these claims. Thus, at the intersection of gender and sociocultural level we obtained the following frequencies (Table 2):

Table 2. Crosstabulation of gender and sociocultural level

	<b>Men</b>		<b>Women</b>	
	<b>Apps</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Apps</b>	<b>%</b>
Low level	4/13	31%	29/29	100%
Middle-low level	8/26	31%	20/20	100%
Middle-high level	9/40	23%	39/53	74%
High level	8/16	50%	17/27	63%

We can conclusively observe that women pertaining to the lowest levels of this community are the ones who are the most representative users of this resource; the fact that they have different response patterns than men can be confirmed by responses which express the

stances that were taken. They prefer to initiate responses by means of an expression which, in spite of its assertive content (due to the previously discussed grammaticalization process that it has undergone), holds sway over the content which comes after and introduces it in a less direct way, even though the stance could be defined as being natural. This supports the assertions that other researchers have made on female language use. Specifically, Watts (1992:467) held that men and women are socialized through distinct forms of socio-communicative conduct, claiming that men use more comprehensive and less explicit schemata than women. In his study on gender differences in the use of pragmatic expressions, Erman (1992:217) concluded that men and women internalize different norms of social interaction which is in many cases motivated by the lack of status among women. It is precisely this feature that could be defining this use, given that those individuals belonging to levels of lower status and power within society are the ones who most frequently use this discourse item. In agreement with what we had mentioned previously, women are more likely to respond using negotiability schemes.

It remains to be seen how the use of *la verdad*, whose function we have defined as *supporting information*, differs in its social impact. The desire of affirming and adding more weight to the content of an utterance-thereby maintaining assertive coherence-leads speakers to insert this marker into their discourse. Nevertheless, as we are going to see, it is not used by the same members of this social community. The following chart reflects this social distribution (Table 3):

Table 3. Percents and probabilities of *la verdad* as supporting information

	<b>Apps</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Prob</b>
Men	66/95	69%	77
Women	24/129	19%	23
1 <sup>a</sup> gen (20-34)	25/52	48%	52
2 <sup>a</sup> gen (34-45)	37/104	36%	51
3 <sup>a</sup> gen (55---)	28/68	41%	48
Low	9/42	21%	34
Middle low	18/46	39%	42
Middle high	45/93	48%	65
High	18/43	42%	60

Contrary to what was reflected by the use of the first function of *la verdad*, it is men and higher sociocultural levels that promote the variant of this marker as a support to information. These results can be interpreted as representing a masculine form of being more convincing, more substantial, and as a desire to present utterances as truth statements. These results can be correlated, then, in opposite fashion, to those obtained for the first function in which introducing *la verdad* at the beginning of a response by women denoted conduct that was clearly differentiated from that of men. It needs to be pointed out that with this strategy of utilizing this marker as a support to information, a reaffirmation of the content of the utterance, which is now introduced as being true, is brought to the fore.

The intersection of these two social categories confirms that it is mainly men from a upper-middle sociocultural level that most frequently make use of this assertive marker, although the frequencies in the lower and lower-middle levels do not decline (Table 4):

Table 4. Crosstabulation of gender and sociocultural level

	Men		Women	
	Apps	%	Apps	%
Low	9/13	69%	0/29	0%
Middle low	18/26	69%	0/20	0%
Middle High	31/40	78%	14/53	26%
High	8/16	50%	10/27	37%

Therefore, the link between this function and those of the masculine gender belonging to a upper-middle sociocultural level corroborates the idea that these individuals have a discourse that is more reiterative, less inclined toward doubt, and more likely to secure the interest of the hearer. It is a way to express the stance of the speaker that is represented by the produced utterance. Moreover, the fact that they may belong to this sociocultural level undoes, in essence, the widely held notion that this sector is the most linguistically unstable and that it is continuously adapting its discourse to the prestige patterns of the community (Serrano, 1996a). In this case, we can clearly observe that the act of formulating a response by making use of the marker *la verdad* as a means of supporting assertive information accounts for some sociolinguistic features that convey security, conviction, and assertiveness.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Results lead us to believe in the coordinative properties of this marker during conversation and also in its discursive meaning though it may be noted as a general feature that it do not convey itself social and or expressive meaning (Schiffrin, 1987:318). Rather, it should be interpreted according with it original meaning and with the discourse constraints in which it appear. In this way, *la verdad* has a grammatical meaning which develops certain discursive traits to be compatible and in consonance with the means of discourse. Such acquired meaning is *introducer of assertion*. Each property is as well conditioned by prosodic factors since the begin of turn of conversation must be linguistically marked off by an element which indicates that a new conversation turn is open. Nicolle (1995:678) states that the main function of markers is the prosodic one, given that it provides an abiding value of interactional negotiation, being repetition a confirmation of that value (Tyler, 1994:671).

Coordinative function of this marker it is also related with the communicative purpose of *upswinging communication*. As we have indicated, conversation interaction convey some negotiation patterns which make it easier and bring in accessibility to it. This is also firmly grounded in observation of how participants themselves differentiate interactional units and how they use a catalogue of discourse markers embedded in utterances named *accounts* (Firth, 1995; Scott and Lyman, 1968:46). *Accounts* are statements made to explain unanticipated or untoward behaviour establishing a basis from which organizationally relevant action may be identified, challenged and discussed. They configure therefore the communicative interaction frame.

Another interesting aspect of discourse markers that has to be undoubtedly mentioned is emotive meaning. Caffi & Janey (1994) consider that feelings and language are intimately interconnected in speech and writing and pragmatics should focus broadly on emotive communication of linguistic units which turn into stylistically devices. During interaction, we tend to perceive others as 'opening up' or 'closing down', being responsive or reticent,

making signs of approach or withdrawal. All such perceptions are rooted in and depend on emotive displays. According to these authors, almost any element is able to adopt that sense, but very clearly markers add to utterance an additional pragmatic type which influence its final nature.

As seen, discourse sequences in which *la verdad* are embedded or introduced by are quite different from those in which this marker does not appear, since they are coherence options to be used or not. As Tyler notes (1994:687), recognition of the independent contextualization cues is necessary in order to explain communicative purpose, and this is a feature that must to be taken into account when analysing markers. Lindenfeld (1994) focus on 'communication goal' as the main factor to describe discursive interaction defining it as a cognitive feature that provide contextual coordinates for utterances. Markers should also be described according to communication goals, trying to accommodate language to cognitive intentions. They perfectly constitute cases of communication goals introducing in the utterance to perform a discursive function, according with the desire of profiling communicative intention in a cognitive way. We can state therefore that, in answer contexts, *la verdad* is related with assertion purpose. The social correlations of markers should be defined according with discourse genre and with every feature described above so that presence or absence of the marker shape a sociolinguistic norm in which communicative purpose, pragmatic meaning and its linkage to utterance, and social factors are involved, drawing up that all the lot it defines accurately speech acts nature.

It can be noticed from distribution of this marker among different social categories that sex is the most salient one thereupon may be related assertiveness and causality-opposition expression and discursive features that it conveys (as coherence and negotiating options) primarily with female gender. It is also worth remarking that gender was significantly associated with sociocultural levels so one can figure out that men and women differ in socio-communicative behavior and that would be due to both social structure of speech community and parameters of linguistic interaction.

Regarding to first question, it should be pointed out that in an urban community like this, some social categories must use communicative strategies which enable and make easier contacts with members. This is very important in professions of middle and higher sociocultural levels (lawyers, doctors, professors, etc) on which a complete integration of women is not completely yet accomplished. Therefore women assume such negotiating discursive devices in order to have and added social value that improve their communicative interaction. Contrarily, men do not use it to reinforce their relationship with other community members, rather the fact that they tend to use *la verdad* as information support embedded into sentence reveals a more assertive and less negotiating discursive patterns. This concurs with traditional findings about gender as we would correlate assertiveness with men and negotiating devices with women.

To answer the second question, we explain the use of *la verdad* as a turn initiator among women from lower sociocultural levels as a negotiating strategy assuming that they do not share a set of sociolinguistic assumptions through common ethnic-identity with interlocutor. In such circumstances more negotiation is required as Dubois and Horvath (1992:134) postulate. Taking up position that women try to expose in their answers is therefore introduced by a marker that make them tender. It is negotiating coherence option which, due to its grammaticalization stage, should be considered also as an assertive unit which states and reinforce a not fully consonant with prior question or simply a personal position. The fact that women from lower sociocultural levels use these cohesive markers should indicate that they possibly have insecurity in taking up a position when an interaction with other linguistic community members is accomplished. Such a non similarity between members

should also come across members of the same social level, so we state that it is related to an individual auto-perception (Serrano, 1996 a).

Finally, we consider that the most salient sociolinguistic finding that we could draw up from the analysis of *la verdad* as a discourse marker is the different

socialization of performing discursive patterns among men and women, being basically in communicative interaction where such linguistic behaviours get interesting sociolinguistic constraints. It goes without saying that we may have to consider the power dimension when explaining gender-specific differences in language use.

The fact that linguistic forms carry out those coherence patterns evidence moreover that being able to demonstrate that aspects of linguistic forms affect coherence would be an important discovery, as Green and Morgan (1981) states. It also cue that form and function are not always unidirectional.

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