

# Expressing agreement in L2 Italian

## Strategies and discourse markers in Spanish learners

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### Abstract

This corpus-based research analyses the most frequent discourse markers (DMs) employed by Spanish learners of L2 Italian to express agreement in spoken informal interactions. These DMs contribute greatly to the development of interactions by building the grounding process (acknowledging what has been said by the communication partner) and by referring back to the common ground which results from the grounding process. Signalling agreement and reception are especially frequent in L2 because learners encourage each other to go forward with the conversational task through these two discursive functions and DMs play a key role in expliciting both of them. We offer a detailed analysis of the way DMs such as *d'accordo*, *ok*, *bene* and *va bene* are used by non-native speakers (NNS) of Italian in comparison to native speakers (NS) and we conclude that there is no clear path of acquisition of these elements and situation is close to fossilization. Besides, learners overuse these DMs since the first stages of acquisition because of the small set of lexical units at their disposal which contrast sharply with their communicational necessities, which could explain some cases of code switching.

### 1. Introduction

This paper aims at analysing the linguistic strategies employed by Spanish learners of L2 Italian when expressing agreement in interaction. Expressing agreement is one of the most frequent conversational moves, both in formal and informal interactions, and it has proved to be one of the best indicators of linguistic competence in a foreign language as it requires comprehending what has been said by the conversational partner and overtly expressing both comprehension and solidarity with the content of the previous utterances.

One of the main problems when analysing lexical markers of agreement<sup>1</sup> is the difficulty to disentangle agreement from signalling understanding, because in all cases the same lexical units may be used to fulfil different discourse functions related to a positive stance (cf. Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2016: 34). The situation is even more complicated in L2 interactions because in this case speakers do not master the use of lexical markers and tend to overuse or underuse them or to assign them some functions which are not conveyed by those lexical units in native speakers (NSs).

However, providing positive evidence is particularly frequent in L2 interactions, especially in non-native speakers (NNSs) with a low linguistic competence, because it is a way of encouraging each other to go on with the interaction and a way of reassuring mutual understanding. According to Condon and Čech (2007), there are at least three types of positive

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we will not take into consideration non lexical markers such as prosody or other paralinguistic elements or non-linguistic means (mimics and kinesics).

evidence in interaction (i.e. means of showing understanding): presupposition of understanding, assertion of understanding and display of understanding. We will explain briefly the difference between them: any response to a partner's contribution presupposes understanding, so in this case understanding is the "default assumption". On the other hand, assertions of understanding require the use of acknowledging signals, normally discourse markers which define the "backchannel verification". Finally, answers to explicit questions or repetition and paraphrases of what has been said are means of displaying and exemplifying understanding.

In this paper, we are mainly interested in the way learners use discourse markers (DMs) linked to assertion of understanding to express agreement with their interlocutors. Expressing agreement presupposes understanding of the interlocutor's utterance but, as we will see, the same lexical units that are employed to express agreement are also used as part of backchannel verification, i.e. they are used to assert understanding and not necessarily agreement. We will explore how learners with different competence in L2 Italian employed DMs that perform both functions.

DMs contribute to the turn-taking structure of conversation and to the dynamic interaction among speakers; they function as cohesive devices and allow speakers to express their emotions, viewpoints and intentions. Therefore, they constitute an essential element of linguistic competence and their absence may cause misunderstandings and oddness when interacting with native speakers. The theoretical studies in this field have only recently had direct applications to language acquisition and teaching, and it has been found that NNSs have strong difficulties to use these elements when developing their oral competence and that little attention has been paid to them in language teaching (cf. Pernas et al. 2011 for a revision of the treatment of DMs in L2 Italian language coursebooks).

Previous research has shown that DMs are not easy to acquire due to their polyfunctionality and mobility in the utterance, that L2 learners use a very reduced number of them compared to native speakers (NSs), and that NNSs tend to attribute many functions to this reduced inventory, overwhelming them with functions that are not found in the L1 and reaching a stage known as fossilisation (Romero Trillo 2002).<sup>2</sup> In this study, we have analysed first which lexical items are acquired to express agreement along with the development of communicative competence and second which functions they may assume that are not found in L1 native speakers.

The investigation is based on the data collected from a learner corpus of L2 Italian speakers whose mother tongue is Spanish (the A.Ma.Dis. Corpus). The data were elicited through role-play interactions between informants with symmetric and asymmetric linguistic competence. Participants in the role-play interactions were supposed to negotiate on different issues (such as buying a present for a friend) where agreement played a prominent role as a conversational strategy.

This research is part of a wider project on the acquisition of pragmatic competence in Italian by Spanish speakers, with especial attention to the use of linguistic devices, such as discourse markers and information structure to manage turn-taking alternation and thus to move forward in conversation, which is not always an easy task for NNSs, especially beginners. Our focus lies on the path of acquisition of these devices in closely-related languages (Spanish and Italian); thus, with this purpose we have analysed the speech of learners belonging to three different levels of competence (beginners (A2), intermediate (B1.3), advanced (C1)).

The results of previous studies show that DMs are present since the initial stages of the acquisition process but in these first stages beginners use a few of these elements; for example, back channel signals (such as interjections *hm*, *uhm*, *ah*), DMs phonetically closed to their L1

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<sup>2</sup> Specific studies devoted to the acquisition of DM are relatively frequent in acquisitional linguistics. For L2 English the most complete study is Müller (2006) who studies the acquisition of some conversational DMs in German speakers. In this paper we will refer specially to studies on L2 Italian, which has been one of the languages where DM have been more widely studied since Andorno's (2000) pioneer research.

(*si*) or to other previously acquired L2 (*ok, d'accordo*). All DMs in beginners' interlanguage have the peculiarity of being phonetically light (one or two syllables) and similar to DMs in the L1 or another L2 (Guil 2015: 373). In intermediate and advanced learners, the inventory is enriched with new elements but the acquisition process is far from linear: Some lexical elements are never acquired, some are used with different functions than in NSs, and some are overused (cf. Guil 2015, Borreguero 2017, Borreguero et al. 2017 for comprehensive panoramic of the acquisition process based on the data of the A.Ma.Dis. Corpus). There is no significant difference between symmetric and asymmetric interactions as far as the use of DMs is concerned. This means that there is not a "mirror-effect" in asymmetric interactions, i.e. NNSs do not repeat the DMs employed by NSs during the conversation.

## 2. Some thoughts on the expression of agreement in closely-related languages

We are interested in the function of expressing agreement in interaction, which is considered to be one of the most basic and frequent discursive functions, both in formal and informal interaction. Expressing agreement is closely tied to politeness strategies in discourse; in fact, when the interlocutor gives positive feedback, the speaker's positive face is reinforced.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, by expressing agreement speakers contribute to interactively establishing the situational context. This is done both by signalling understanding and by signalling agreement, which presupposes understanding as we have seen above. "Participants display their understanding of each other's utterances and the relationship that holds between these utterances to each other. These interpretations may be ratified or challenged by the coparticipants in the following turn" (Fischer 2007). This process is known as the "grounding" process.<sup>4</sup>

Languages have a wide range of lexical units and phrases to express agreement with different degrees of intensity. In Spanish, the most frequent ones are *sí, vale, bien* (quite neutral), *bueno* (which can be used for partial agreement), *por supuesto, claro* (emphatical), *desde luego, no faltaba más, sin (lugar a) duda(s)* and the adverbs *ciertamente, naturalmente, obviamente* (very emphatic). In Italian, *sì<sup>5</sup>, ok, d'accordo, bene, va bene* are the most common markers for agreement (Bazzanella 1995, 2006) while *certo, certamente, senz'altro, infatti, in effetti, ci mancherebbe* include increasing levels of emphasis and therefore subjectivity. We will deal with some important differences in use between these DMs below.

For some of them, expressing agreement is their core meaning and function (Sp. *vale*, It. *ok, d'accordo, bene*), while others have been traditionally considered evidential adverbs that indicate not only the source of information (mainly inferential in these cases) but also a high level of certainty about the information reported in the interlocutor's utterance; indicating this certainty becomes a way of expressing agreement, as it can be seen in (1).

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<sup>3</sup> This does not imply that they cannot admit ironic uses and become a strategy of impoliteness (Gras 2003). This author also explores other uses of these DMs as concessive and focus makers.

<sup>4</sup> According to Fischer (2007), the main difference between DMs (or discourse particles) and modal particles is that while the first ones are very actively in the grounding process, modal particles refer to the common ground of an interaction, i.e. what is shared by the communication partners, which is usually unproblematic and thus implicit.

<sup>5</sup> Andorno (2016), contrary to Bazzanella and following previous studies by Bernini (1996) and Andorno and Rosi (cf. References in Andorno 2016) does not consider *sì* a confirmative marker, but only an affirmative one which indicates the polarity of the utterance. We have no doubt that this is the case with NSs, but the situation with NNSs is far more complex, although we will not deal with it the present study, as this author shows in Andorno (2007: 102). Cf. also Koch's (2016) study on the use of Sp. *sí* by German speakers of L2 Spanish.

(1) A: ¿Vienes a la fiesta?  
B: *Sí*  
A: ¿Llevamos un regalo, no?  
B: ¡*Claro!*

[A: Are you coming to the party?  
B: Yes  
A: We will bring a present, won't we?  
B: Of course!]

In (1), the fact that one has to bring a present when invited to a party is part of the common cultural knowledge of both speakers, and there is no need for negotiation. In this sense, B responds ¡*Claro!* to indicate that the relation between going to a party and bringing a present is expected and therefore that s/he agrees with A's proposal. But B responds *Sí* to the first question because there is no presupposition about what B is going to do in A question (or in B's response to that question), and it is thus presented as open to negotiation.

The number of evidential adverbs (or adverbial phrases) employed to express agreement is higher in Spanish than in Italian, and there is also an increasing number of studies devoted to their analysis, often from a comparative perspective, to try to delimit their meaning and contexts of appearance: (*muy bien*, *bueno* (Fuentes 1993c and Blas Arroyo 2011), *claro* (Fuentes 1993a, Gras 2003, Pons 2008, Solís 2013), *cómo no*, *de acuerdo* (Ruiz Gurillo 1999), *desde luego* (Fuentes 1993b, Pérez Canales 2003, Alvarado and Ruiz Gurillo 2011, Solís 2012a), *efectivamente / en efecto* (Pérez Canales 2003, Solís 2012a, Llopis 2015), *por supuesto* (Fuentes 1993b, Ruiz Gurillo 1999, Gras 2003, Pérez Canales 2003, Solís 2013) and some modal adverbs ending in *-mente* such as *naturalmente*, *ciertamente*, *obviamente*, etc. (cf. Fuentes 1993b). There are also more comprehensive views of all (or almost all) these elements such as Fuentes (1991, 1995), Martín Zorraquino and Portolés (1999) and Solís (2012b). Researchers are, however, far from reaching an agreement on how to classify these markers in a general taxonomy. Solís (2012b: 17-43) – and to a lesser degree Pérez Canales (2003) – review the different conceptualisations in the most recent grammars, the main dictionaries of DMs (Santos Ríos 2003, Briz et al. 2008 and Fuentes 2009) and most of the monographic studies mentioned above.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of Italian, *sì* (Bernini 1995, Andorno 2016) and *bene* and its variations (*va bene*, *be'*, *va be'*) have attracted most of the attention (Frank-Job 2006, Lindbadh 2015a/b), while to our knowledge other DMs of this group have been almost ignored until today in L1 Italian (but see Mandelli (2006) about *in effetti* and Andorno (2016) about *esatto*, *infatti* and *okay*). The situation is not different in a L2, where the pair *sì/no* in positive and negative questions of L2 Italian speakers has been analysed by Andorno (2007, 2008) and Andorno and Rossi (2016). From a contrastive perspective we would like to highlight Calvo (2001), and for overview approaches, cf. Bazzanella (1995, 2006).

These DMs appear more frequently in conversation than in written texts, or to be more precise, in immediate communication than in distant communication, so they are usually considered conversational markers or markers with a main interactional function, which means that their main discursive function is to regulate the turn-taking alternation; overtly agreeing with the interlocutor is often a way of encouraging the discourse flow.

All of them share some characteristics: they may appear both as part of an utterance or constituting an utterance by themselves; for example, acting as answers to questions or as responses to invitations (see (1) above). Regarding their procedural meaning, most authors

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<sup>6</sup> Fuentes (1991) offers a no longer up-to-date revision of the descriptions of the so called modal or modality adverbs in the main monographic studies on the classification of adverbs in English, French and Spanish.

consider that they present the content of the utterance or the relation between one utterance and the previous one (or implicit information) as obvious, evident and unquestionable; that is why they are considered evidential adverbs (or adverbial phrases).<sup>7</sup> However, as Solís (2012a, 2012b: 55-68 and *passim* and 2013) has shown, most descriptions do not allow to clearly establish in what contexts they can or cannot be used. Here, we follow her proposal, which is based on the speaker's attitude towards the interaction and not towards the content of the utterance itself. In fact, our focus of attention lays on what the speaker is doing when using one or the other DM to express agreement.

However, we cannot forget that some of these lexical units function as acknowledgement tokens in both languages, together with a variety of interjections (*aha, uhm*, etc.): Sp. *sì, vale*; It. *sì, ok*. This polifunctionality is also shown in L2 learners.

The above mentioned interest in the speaker's intention has led us to stress the study of pragmatic functions. Therefore, we have adopted an onomasiological approach which is focused on the pragmatic function – not on the semantic value – and analyses which lexical (or paralinguistic) elements fulfil this function in the learners' variety.<sup>8</sup> As in previous studies, we follow the functional taxonomy in López Serena & Borreguero (2010), which distinguishes three discursive macrofunctions: interactional, metadiscursive and ideational.<sup>9</sup> Following Bazzanella (1995), the interactional macrofunction is subdivided in control function, contact function and reactive function. The interesting point for us in this research is that the same lexical elements, when functioning as DMs, may fulfil different interactional functions; for example, *ok* can manifest agreement, but it functions also as a back-channel signal, i.e. as a sign of phatic function, which is part of the contact function, i.e. it encourages the speaker to keep the floor. The situation is much more complicated for DMs such as Sp. *bueno* or It. *bene* (cf. Calvo 2001). The high degree of polysemy of these DMs is one of the reasons why we deem the onomasiological approach (from function to lexical element) to be a most appropriate perspective in the task of tracing their acquisitional path in NNSs.

In adopting an acquisitional perspective, one of the difficulties for the analysis in the case of Spanish and Italian is that the minimal expression of agreement is phonetically identical in both languages (It. *sì*, Sp. *sí*), so it is difficult to identify a real process of acquisition.<sup>10</sup> For this reason we will analyse all the DMs found in our corpus to express agreement with the exception of *sì/sí*, which represents a challenge that deserves an independent study.<sup>11</sup>

There are, of course, other DMs fulfilling this discursive function which present phonetic similarities, such as It. *certo* / Sp. *cierto*, It. *d'accordo* / Sp. *de acuerdo*, It. *bene* / Sp. *bien*, but

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<sup>7</sup> The differences are linked to the degree of pre-existing necessity between the connected parts of discourse (for example, the necessity pre-exists for *por supuesto*, but it does not for *claro*, cf. Gras 2003) or to the expectations of the interlocutor: for example, *en efecto* and *efectivamente* confirm what the speaker thinks it was expected by the hearer (Pérez Canales 2003: 1538).

<sup>8</sup> The onomasiological approach is increasingly being used in studies on pragmatic acquisition. For the acquisition of discourse markers in L2 Spanish and Italian, cf. Jafrancesco 2015, Pascual Escagedo 2015, Borreguero 2009, 2017, Borreguero et al. 2017.

<sup>9</sup> For a full presentation of the taxonomy, cf. López Serena and Borreguero (2010) and Borreguero (2015). For a shorter presentation in English, cf. Borreguero (2017).

<sup>10</sup> This difficulty is present also in other DM: disagreement marker such as *no* or the most difficult adversative Sp. *pero* and It. *però*, with a different accent position in each language which is often neglected by learners and makes almost impossible to decide whether the Spanish learner of L1 Italian is using a Spanish connective or has just acquired the lexical component but not the prosodical one of the Italian connective (cf. Borreguero 2009a/b for the use of adversative connectives in written and oral L2 Italian).

<sup>11</sup> The few studies on *sì* L2 Italian (D'Alfonso 2016) and L2 Spanish (Koch 2016) does not concern close-related languages. For example, the Pavia project and studies based on Siena's ADIL corpus focus on the acquisition of Italian by NNSs whose mother tongue is typological very distant from Italian (Giacalone Ramat 2003, D'Alfonso 2016, respectively). This is one of the reasons why our results are difficult to compare with Andorno's (2007, 2008) based on Chinese and Tigrine speakers and with Nigoević and Sučić's (2011) on Croatian learners. Other studies on French or Spanish NSs do not focus specifically on DMs expressing agreement (Manili 2001, Jafrancesco 2015).

they are not so close as to prevent the analyst from deciding whether the learner is using a L1 or a L2 unit. However, as we will see, there are phonetically similar lexical elements that do not share the same function, as the pairs It. *buono*<sup>12</sup> / Sp. *bueno* or It. *chiaro* / Sp. *claro*, where only the Spanish member functions as a DM. The use of the most phonetically similar element for expressing agreement to supply a lack of linguistic competence in interaction is one of our more interesting findings and will be discussed below.

### 3. Some brief methodological remarks

#### 3.1. The corpus

Our research is based on data collected from a learner corpus of L2 Italian speakers whose mother tongue is Spanish. The corpus contains 36 video-recorded interactions with informants of 3 different levels of proficiency (12 are symmetric conversations between learners and 24 are asymmetric ones with a native speaker). We also recorded a small corpus of Italian native speakers (see Table 1). The corpus was collected in 2006 and the informants were students from the Public School of Languages in two Spanish cities (Segovia and Valencia).<sup>13</sup> It has a total duration of around 400 minutes, and it contains 38.000 tokens.

**Table 1.** A.Ma.Dis. learner corpus: number and type of interactions

	Initial level	Intermediate level	Advanced level	Native
<b>Symmetric interactions</b> <sup>14</sup>	4	4	4	4
<b>Asymmetric interactions</b>	8	8	8	24

Participants were provided with very simple instructions to take part in role-play situations which were designed to produce semi-spontaneous interactions. Three of these situations were task-oriented: choosing a present for a friend, deciding what to do when facing a rise in the rent of the apartment and a job interview for a babysitter position. The fourth one was a not task-oriented, free talk with an Italian visitor at a friend's house. The first two situations were chosen for the symmetric interactions (between NNSs with similar linguistic competence) and the other two for asymmetric interactions with a NS and needed a more formal register.

<sup>12</sup> In some varieties *buono* can function as a DM, mainly under the form *va buo'* or *va buono* in Tuscan Italian.

<sup>13</sup> The corpus is entirely available online at [www.marcadores-discursivos.es](http://www.marcadores-discursivos.es). This website contains also information about the Project and the main publications of the members of the A.Ma.Dis. research group. More information about the corpus in Guil et al. (2008), Guil (2015) and Borreguero (2017) (among others). All the NNSs were university graduate women between 25 and 45 years old.

<sup>14</sup> The number of tokens increases through the three levels because, as expected, learners with higher linguistic competence become more fluent, thus they are able to produce a higher number of tokens in similar time slots (around 10 minutes). As far as symmetric interactions is concerned, the corpus contains 4974 tokens at the beginner level, 7538 at the intermediate level and 8344 at the advance level, a number that matches the 8141 tokens of the NS symmetric interactions.

### 3.2. The theoretical framework

In the analysis of these DMs, we will follow Solís' (2012a/b, 2013) analyses, which identify the invariant meaning of DMs and distinguish it from their contextual meaning effects in order to find a convincing explanation of their mutual differences. According to this author, expressing agreement is not the basic meaning of these DMs but only a contextual effect derived from their use in certain contexts. But when a speaker uses *claro* or *desde luego* as a response to invitations or questions, he is not agreeing upon anything but just providing an affirmative answer different from a simple *sí* (cf. Pons 2008 who proposes two different markers in the case of *claro* to explain these two different functions). The strong argument in Solís' proposal is that the invariant meaning of these markers does not lay on the speaker's attitude towards the propositional content but towards the interaction and his/her interlocutor (this is what she calls the metalinguistic dimension, cf. Solís 2012b: 47-49), in other words, the grounding process. In her analysis, she offers a very detailed and convincing analysis of the most used Spanish markers to express agreement, an analysis that allows her to get rid of tags such as 'emphatical', 'argument reinforcer', and 'evidential', which are often vague and ambiguous in this case, because they appear in the descriptions of almost all of them.

We will claim that by using these DMs the speaker expresses his/her point of view about the relationship with the interlocutor and about the act of producing an utterance, adopting a certain particular position (Solís 2012b: 66). The five parameters to describe these DMs are: a) the degree of commitment of the speaker;<sup>15</sup> b) the presence or absence of expectations about this commitment; c) the dependency of this commitment on external circumstances or on the speaker's decision; d) the fact that this commitment is up for negotiation or not; e) the relationship of the commitment with the extralinguistic world (Solís 2012b: 82-92). Using these five parameters, we will try to describe the DMs found in our corpus.

## 4. Quantitative and qualitative analysis

We have extracted automatically the number of occurrences of the most frequent DMs employed in our corpus to express agreement (see Table 2).<sup>16</sup> Although DMs are highly polyfunctional in discourse we have considered only their main function in each occurrence.

As Table 2 shows, the four most frequent DMs in the learners' variety (*d'accordo*, *ok*, *va bene*, *bene*) have a basic meaning of agreement, but there are important differences between them, as we will see below. By having a quick look at Table 2, it can be easily verified that: a) these DMs are very frequent in our corpus, they represent almost the 0.8% of all the tokens; b) these DMs are present since the very first stages of language acquisition (95 occurrences just in the initial level); c) there is no clear progression through the three levels, above all there is no quantitative progression: some DMs are more frequent at the initial level (*d'accordo*, *va bene*), others at the intermediate level (*ok*) and others at the advanced level (*bene*); d) contrary to previous expectations, these DMs are more frequent in the NNSs' speech without exception.

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<sup>15</sup> An explicit commitment allows to distinguish DMs such as *de acuerdo*, *en efecto* or *por supuesto* from others such as *al parecer* or *por lo visto*, which lack the commitment of the speaker (Gaviño 2011).

<sup>16</sup> We have found no adverbs or adverbial phrases which are considered to have evidential meaning in our corpus and this may be due to two reasons: a) these DMs are not part of the lexical inventory of learners with a low competence of L2 Italian and neither do they seem to be acquired later on neither; b) they belong to more formal registers in language so they are not very frequent in oral spontaneous conversations, not even in the ones which are more formal, such as the job interview. This confirms what has been found for Spanish NNSs (Solís 2012: 9 and the quoted references, Pascual Escagedo 2015).

**Table 2.** Most frequent DM expressing agreement in the A.Ma.Dis. Corpus

DM	Initial	Intermediate	Advanced	Total (NNS)	NS	Total
<b>d'accordo</b>	58	1	25	<b>84</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>ok</b>	13	37	5	<b>55</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>va bene</b>	22	10	2	<b>34</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>bene</b>	2	4	11	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Total</b>	95	52	43	<b>190</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>301</b>

These DMs share some common discursive properties regarding their semantic and their position in the utterance. They have the possibility of constituting a turn on their own or of being part of a more complex turn, divided in discursive units (acts and subacts<sup>17</sup>), in which they are accompanied by other discursive units which offer an explanation of the agreement (Gras 2003). When they constitute a turn on their own they establish an anaphoric link with the previous utterance that allows the recovery of the part of the utterance that is not repeated.

- (2) A: Vieni questa sera a cena?  
B: *Sì* (vengo stasera) / *Certo* (che vengo stasera), etc.

[A: Are you coming tonight for dinner?  
B: Yes (I'm coming tonight) / Sure (I am coming tonight), etc.]

Contrary to what has been noticed about DM *sì/sí* [*yes*],<sup>18</sup> the main discursive function of these DMs is to express conformity with what has been said by the interlocutor and thus help the conversation to go on. This discursive function derives from an invariant meaning related to the assertion of a predicative relation to which these elements anaphorically refer.

According to Solís (2012b), DMs such as *sí*, *de acuerdo* and *vale* (equivalents to It. *sì* and *ok*) are different from all the other agreement DMs because they are oriented to the extra linguistic word.<sup>19</sup> This means that the speaker expresses a commitment which regards not only the predicative relation of the previous utterance but also some possible future action in the extra linguistic world. In (3), M proposes to carry on with an action already agreed upon by the speakers and N not only confirms the predicative relation 'we first do that' but expresses her commitment to actually take the action.

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<sup>17</sup> The minimal structural units in conversation have been called acts and subacts by the researchers of the Val.Es.Co. group (2003, 2014). Act units have been classified in substantive or adjacent acts according to their semantic and pragmatic contribution to the conversation. A DM expressing agreement constitutes a substantive act, because it is autonomous and can substitute the whole turn.

<sup>18</sup> In the case of *sì/sí*, there is still a debate going on about the nature of these elements. They have been traditionally considered as affirmation adverbs or presentences (Bernini 1995) due to their anaphoric nature and their capacity of substituting a whole sentence. However, they have a variety of functions: as DMs they not only express agreement but also function as backchannel signals, i.e. as markers of reception and comprehension of the interlocutor's message.

<sup>19</sup> Martín Zorraquino and Portolés (1999) considered *vale* and *de acuerdo* as 'deontic modality markers' while *sí* is a 'conversational metadiscursive marker'. All the other DMs expressing agreement are considered evidential (epistemic) markers. We will not discuss different taxonomies in this paper, but we would like to highlight that there is some agreement on the fact that DMs such as *sì*, *vale*, *ok* have a special status in the family of the so-called affirmation operators or affirmation markers.



- (3) M: no / dai prima facciamo quello che [hai=]  
 N: [ok]  
 M: = detto te (3VA2, 164-166)

[M: no / come on we first do what you said  
 N: ok']

#### 4.1. *D'accordo*

Likewise, *sì* and *de acuerdo* are different from all the others DMs because they do not convey any expectation about the commitment of the speaker, i.e. the speaker simply confirms a predicative relation but without presupposing that his/her commitment is taken for granted. As in the case of *ok* (see (3) above), the speaker confirms not only a predicative relation but also commits him/herself to take some action in the extra linguistic world when agreeing with the prepositional phrase *d'accordo* – the expression arises from the phrase *essere d'accordo*, literally 'to be in agreement', 'to agree'-. The main difference with *ok* is that this commitment is not taken for granted by the speaker, i.e. s/he does not consider that his/her commitment should be obvious for the interlocutor (Solís 2012b: 129-131).

According to the data in Table 2, the most frequent DM employed by our learners is *d'accordo* (84 occurrences), which almost doubles the number of occurrences found in NSs data (46). However, it is necessary to look at these numbers carefully because most of these occurrences belong to the same informant, which happens to be a French teacher with a very low level of linguistic competence in Italian and whose interlanguage is scattered with several elements from her main L1 (French). We could claim, without being too adventurous, that the presence of *d'accordo* in this informant is a positive transfer of Fr. *d'accord*, but interference with Sp. *de acuerdo* cannot be discarded either.

Although expressing agreement is not the only function fulfilled by *d'accordo*, it is the most important one. This does not mean that, in certain contexts, this DM has not other secondary functions, but in most of the occurrences this is its only function. Among its secondary functions we highlight taking the floor (43 times), closing the interaction (10), phatic function (7), closing a topic (7), topic shifting (3), online planning (2) and introducing a digression (1).

In fact, Table 2 gathers only the occurrences of *d'accordo* when expressing agreement is its main function, but looking at the global numbers of our corpus (Table 3), we can see that *d'accordo* accomplishes two other functions, a phatic/backchannel function and asking for confirmation.

**Table 3.** Total number of occurrences of *d'accordo* divided by main functions

Discursive functions of <i>d'accordo</i>	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	Total (NNS)	NS	Total
<b>Total</b>	81	1	37	119	59	178
<b>Expressing agreement</b>	<b>58</b>	1	25	<b>84</b>	<b>46</b>	130
<b>Phatic function</b>	20	0	11	31	0	31
<b>Asking for confirmation</b>	3	0	1	4	13	17

The phatic function is hardly found in NS and can be considered an overuse of this DM instead of *sì*, which is far more frequent in this function in NSs. As it is shown in Table 4, there is no single occurrence of *d'accordo* with this function in NSs but we have 20 in NNSs. One good example of this overuse is (4), where Ch uses *d'accordo* [*I agree*] as a phatic cue in an inadequate context (Ch is the learner with 66 occurrences of this DM in our corpus):

- (4) Ch: uhm / ti piacee↑ / ti piace iil→ // ehm / la cena?  
 L: ma / è molto buona / guarda / perché sono cose nuove / completamente nuove per me  
 ↑ / mi piace→ tantissimo sì / questa insalata che hai fatto è ottima / direi / [sì sì]  
 Ch: [d'accordo]  
 / la car- la carne tu- → / ti piace? (1SG6, 4-6)

[Ch: uhm / do you enjoy / do you enjoy the // ehm the dinner?  
 L: it is really good / listen / because they are new things / completely new for me / I like  
 it so much really / this salad you made is excellent / I would say / yes yes  
 Ch: I agree / the meat the meaty you / do you like it?]

We must say, however, that when the phatic function is the primary function, expressing agreement is present as secondary function in 4 occurrences, although in the other cases taking the floor is the secondary function.

On the other hand, the use of *d'accordo* with interrogative intonation to ask for confirmation about a previous agreement is present in NSs speech and very scarcely used by NNSs (only 4 occurrences). Normally in these cases *d'accordo* has no other secondary functions:

- (5) L: [ok] / perfetto / allora facciamo così↓ / io // la- le faccio sapere appenaaa / appena  
 possibile insomma↓ / e comunque anche lei sì / ecco / ci pensi↑ / ee / e ne riparliamo→  
 / tra qualche giorno↑  
 Ch: d'accordo [signora=]  
 L: [d'accordo?]  
 Ch: = una- una dema- [una domanda] (1SG5, 235-238)

[L: ok / perfect / then we do this way / I// will inform you as soon / as soon as possible  
 then / and anyway you too / right / you think about it / eeh / and we talk again about it /  
 in a couple of days  
 Ch: I agree madam  
 L: do you agree?  
 Ch: one one question]

To sum up the presence of *d'accordo* in our corpus is mainly biased by the fact that one learner overuses this DM both in the expression agreement function and in the phatic function (a fact already noticed by Guil 2015). In fact, the numbers at the three levels are completely unbalanced (81 occurrences at the initial level, only 1 at the intermediate level and 25 at the advance level; see fn. 13 about number of tokens in each level). It is important to notice that the 81 occurrences at the initial level are produced by three informants: C (1), T (13) – also a teacher of French – and Ch (67). This is a good example of how idiosyncratic uses can alter results of research if they are not detected in time, as in this case. Moreover, if we consider NSs productions, we see that one native speaker from Tuscany produces 30 occurrences (half of them), while the numbers are lower for a NS from Piemonte (15) and even lower for a NS from Padova (3). Therefore, there seem to be preferences in use by NSs linked to their diatopic (and probably diastratic) variety.

## 4.2. *Ok*

A number of studies about how English NSs employ *ok* in conversation (cf. Fischer 2006, Condon and Čech 2007 and the references quoted in these studies) agree that *ok* has intertwined discourse functions: one is related to the structure of the interaction and marks transitions in discourse, in fact it often appears at structural boundaries<sup>20</sup>; another one is related to asserting the understanding of current discourse; and another displays understanding of the common ground which is being built during conversation.

According to Andorno (2016: 108-109, 112-114), the difference between *ok* and all the other Italian DM usually employed to confirm the interlocutor's utterance is that *ok* expresses agreement with a state-of-the-art that is not directly accessible to the speaker but it is just being presented by the interlocutor and thus it modifies the speaker's previous knowledge on a certain situation. This specific function explains why *ok* can appear as a response to directive utterances contrary to other DM such as *esatto* or *infatti* as in (6).

(6) A: Avvicinati!

B: okay / ?esatto / ?infatti (adapted from Andorno 2016: 113)

Bearing in mind these insightful descriptions, we will describe the use of It. *ok* in our corpus adapting the description of Sp. *vale* in Solís (2012b: 97-99). To our knowledge, there is no study about how and whether It. *ok* has preserved all and every function of Eng. *ok* but we will hypothesise that this is the case in Spanish learners' speech: There is probably a convergence of their linguistic competence on L2 English and the uses of the equivalent Spanish DM *vale*. We consider that *ok* expresses the speaker's commitment (that the speaker takes for granted) to undertake some action in the extralinguistic world. Its meaning is therefore very close to that of *d'accordo*, but expectation plays here a key role. This explains why it appears frequently at the end of an interaction or at the end of a sequence inside the interaction, once an agreement about what to do next has been reached.

The numbers are not more trustable in the case of *ok*, and there is no clear progression along the three levels (cf. Table 4 below). The scarce presence at the initial level may be explained by the concurrence with *d'accordo*, but it is important to bear in mind that the 13 occurrences are produced by just one learner (C). The number rises suddenly at the intermediate level (37 occurrences) and decreases again at the advanced level (5 occurrences).<sup>21</sup> It is not easy to explain why the apparent progression from the initial to the intermediate level is abruptly interrupted at the advanced level. But looking at the other DMs, we can observe that their frequency is always lower in this level (except in the case of *d'accordo*, which is practically absent at the intermediate level). The reason for that may be that when L2 speakers are more confident, they do not need to constantly display politeness strategies to encourage the interlocutor, which is a very common strategy at the initial level. Therefore, the number of DMs with this primary function is drastically reduced. However, once again the use of *ok* at the

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<sup>20</sup> This function has been analysed in decision-making interactions (face-to-face and human-to-computer) by Condon and Čech (2007), who found that *ok* more frequently seems to signal that the previous decision routine has been completed and a next decision routine is initiated. This is not necessarily linked to verbal interaction but to extra linguistic actions. "When *ok* marks the transition from one decision sequence to the next, it does not necessarily do so in response of an utterance from the conversational partner".

<sup>21</sup> In fact, not all learners employ this DM with the same frequency: we can find *ok* in only one learner at the initial level (with 28 occurrences, cf. Table 4 below), two learners at the intermediate level produce 45 and 31 occurrences respectively (76 out of 80) and at the advanced level one participant 8 occurrences out of 18 are to be attributed to the same learner.

intermediate level is better explained as an idiosyncratic phenomenon: some learners privilege some DMs to display certain discursive functions.

As it was also the case with *d'accordo*, “*okay* functions basically in two ways: it signals discourse boundaries and thus indicates agreement about topic boundaries (the discourse marker use), and acknowledges what is being said (the feedback signal use)” (Fischer 2007). This is clearly shown in Table 4, where it is easy to see that expressing agreement and phatic functions are the most frequent functions in our corpus. While the expressing agreement function is balanced in the number of occurrences between NNSs and NSs, the phatic function – as it was also the case with *d'accordo* – is much more frequent in NNSs. These numbers evince the learners’ necessity to constantly assert their understanding of what is uttered by their communication partner to reinforce their positive face, as it can be observed in (7), where the learner C shows understanding of what is being explained by the native speaker E:

(7) E: § stanno facendo lezioni private / in Italia di spagnolo per avere una minima idea / però / &eh / ecco / avrei bisogno di una persona che parli spagnolo e italiano per stare con loro durante l'estate

C: *ok*

E: in modo tale che / quando inizia il nuovo corso↑ (1VA3, 61-63)

[E: they are having some Spanish home tutoring / in Italy to have a minimal basis/ but/ &eh / right/ I would need a person who speaks Spanish and Italian to be with them during the summer

C: ok

E: so that/ when the new school year begins]

In this function, *ok* marks internal boundaries within discourse and its occurrences help the speaker to organise his/her discourse in information chunks. Thus the phatic function is both an interactive and a metadiscursive function, as it helps to assemble discourse internally.

In our corpus *ok* covers at least 9 different functions (taking into account only the primary functions), therefore it can be considered a highly polyfunctional DM if compared to *d'accordo* or to *bene/va bene*, as we will see below. But the number of occurrences for other functions (mainly related to turn-alternation) is noticeably lower and only in the case of taking the floor *ok* is more frequent in NSs than in NNSs. Besides, agreement expression is frequently the secondary function of these occurrences.<sup>22</sup>

**Table 4.** Total number of occurrences of *ok* divided by main function

	Initial	Intermediate	Advanced	NNS (Total)	NS	Total
<b>Total</b>	28	80	18	126	98	224
<b>Expressing agreement</b>	13	37	5	55	50	105
<b>Phatic</b>	11	24	6	41	19	60
<b>Taking the floor</b>	2	8	2	12	20	32

<sup>22</sup> Of course, occurrences whose main function is agreement may also have secondary functions. For example, we have found the following: taking the floor (38 occurrences), marking internal boundaries by signally topic shift or recovery or by closing conversation (10), leaving the floor (7), keeping the floor (1) and paraprastic reformulation (1).

Closing conversation	1	1	3	5	1	6
Asking for confirmation	0	1	1	2	3	5
Leaving the floor	1	1	1	3	1	4
Online planning	0	4	0	4	1	5
Keeping the floor	0	4	0	4	1	5
Topic shift or topic closing	0	0	0	0	2	2

Finally, we would like to point out the fact that *ok* and *d'accordo* are frequently combined in our corpus, both in NSs (8) and in NSSs (9) as well as with other agreement markers, such as *perfetto* [*perfect*] (found only in NSs). These combinations appear mainly when speakers want to close the interaction (cf. 8) and evince the necessity of closing negotiation by assessing an explicit, reinforced and emphatic agreement.

- (8) L: *ok* / *perfetto* / posso chiamarla in qualsiasi mo[mento?]  
 Ch: [sì / in] qualche momento perché si noon sonoo da uno èè un al- un [altro↓]  
 L: [ok↓] / *perfetto*↓  
 / *d'accordo*↓ / io la ringrazio infinitamente↑ / e le le faccio sapere allora↓  
 Ch: **d'acco[rdo]** / grazie]  
 L: [prego↓ / l'accompagno] / venga /// arrivederci] (1SG5,96-100)

[L: *ok* / *perfect* / may I call you at any time?  
 Ch: yes / at any time because if you don't reach me in a place you can reach me in the other  
 L: *ok* / *perfect* / all right / many many thanks / and I will keep you informed then  
 Ch: *ok* / thank you  
 L: you are welcome / I accompany you / come /// bye]

- (9) E: è tutto spesato / non ti preoccupare  
 MJ: **ok** / *d'accordo*  
 E: poi quello che vuoi fare tu nel tuo tempo libero logicamente no (3VA5, 191-193)

[E: everything is covered / don't worry  
 MJ: *ok* / all right  
 E: but what you want to do in your free time it is logically not]

### 4.3. *Bene* and *Va bene*

Italian modal adverb *bene* [*well*] has gone through a desemantisation process to express not that an action is performed in an adequate way, as in *Scrive bene* [*He writes well*], but that the speaker agrees with what has been said or gives his/her consent to a situation. This desemantisation process has been accompanied by a change in utterance position from the internal predicative relation – where it precedes or follows the verb – to an independent position as a separate utterance (holophrastic use). Both desemantisation and greater mobility are part of a grammaticalisation process (Hopper and Traugott 2003). This is a well-described process for English *well* or Spanish *bien* (Fuentes 1993; Blas Arroyo 2011), among others, and the result is a highly polyfunctional DM which tends to conform complex DMs by adding new elements (the

case of It. *va bene* or Sp. *muy bien, pues bien, ahora bien*) or by reducing its phonetic substance (the case of It. *be'* or *va be'*).

All these markers have kept the acceptance of information or situation as their invariant meaning and from this meaning they have developed a variety of pragmatic functions: expressing agreement is one of them, but metadiscursive functions such as topic shift and pre-closing markers are also frequent (Borreguero 2017). However, It. *bene* and Sp. *bien* are not symmetrical in their uses, although they may share some of these functions. *Bene* is much more frequent in interaction and its functions are equivalent to those of Sp. *bueno*, which is a source of confusion and transfer phenomena in learners, as we will see in the next section. It. *bene* and Sp. *bueno* have as many interactional metadiscursive functions, including not only discourse organisation but even reformulation in the case of *bueno* (cf. Martín Zorraquino and Portolés 1999 and the references quoted in this work).

*Bene* is the less frequent of the four DMs analysed here and it has been found to fulfil only two closely-related functions in our corpus, as we have seen in the analysis of *ok*: expressing agreement and the phatic function. Numbers are slightly superior for NNSs and it is easy to observe a good progression from the initial to the intermediate level but after this level, the situation seems to become stagnant as there is no significant change in the advanced level, except a slight reduction of the number of occurrences.

**Table 5.** Total number of occurrences of *bene* divided by main function

	Initial	Intermediate	Advanced	NNS (Total)	NS	Total
<b>Total</b>	4	17	12	33	12	45
<b>Expressing agreement</b>	2	14	11	27	6	33
<b>Phatic</b>	2	3	1	6	6	12

But what is remarkable in these data is that NSs hardly ever use *bene* as a DM (only 12 occurrences out of 45 belong to NSs' speech), especially in the function of marking an explicit agreement. This proves that *bene* is progressively abandoning its interactional functions in NSs' speech (Lindbladh 2015b).

On the other hand, the grammaticalised predicate *va bene [ok, all right]* is more present in both the NNSs and the NSs' speech and displays a wider range of functions, as it is shown in Table 6. *Va bene* overtly expresses acceptance of the situation or the information conveyed by previous utterances and it is one of the most cooperative DMs in conversation. This explicit acceptance reduces its capability of becoming just an acknowledging signal (the phatic function), a function we have only found at the initial stages of acquisition.

**Table 6.** Total number of occurrences of *va bene* divided by main functions

	Initial	Intermediate	Advanced	NNS (Total)	NS	Total
<b>Total</b>	26	11	2	39	18	65
<b>Expressing agreement</b>	22	10	2	34	9	43
<b>Topic shift</b>	0	0	0	0	4	4
<b>Taking the floor</b>	0	1	0	1	2	3
<b>Phatic</b>	3	0	0	3	0	3
<b>Closing interaction</b>	1	0	0	1	3	4

Notwithstanding the low number of occurrences in NSs' speech in our corpus, we would like to highlight that *va bene* occurs frequently as pre-closing DM in NS interactions: in fact NSs employ *va bene* as a pre-closing signal (directly preceding the greetings) in 3 out of 4 symmetric conversations among NS (Lindbladh 2015a), as in (10):

(10) L: = chiaramente / cioè a quelle condizioni o noi / ci cerchiamo qualcos'altro / poi vedrà lui / insomma §  
 O: § °(perfetto)° §  
 L: § quello che vuole fare  
 O: *va bene* / ti saluto che devo andare → / [(( ))]  
 L: [ok]  
 O: ciao  
 L: niente / ci vediamo ↑ / stasera / ciao  
 O: ciao (NAT1, 49-56)

[L: obviously / I mean with those conditions or we / look for something else / then he will see / so  
 O: perfect  
 L: what he wants to do  
 O: ok / I say bye I have to go  
 L: ok  
 O: bye  
 L: so / we see each other / this evening / bye  
 O: bye]

This function, which is shared also by *d'accordo* and *ok*, is hardly found in NNSs, hence we have again a functional dysimmetry.

## 5. Spanish DMs in the learner corpus: the role of code-switching

The use of lexical elements from the L1 when interacting in L2 is a very frequent phenomenon. Previous studies (Borreguero 2017) have shown that code-switching is particularly recurrent in the case of DMs as if the need to use these elements were so strong that it would make the learner turn to his/her L1 when the lexical unit is not available in his/her L2. The agreement function is no exception but in our corpus, Spanish markers expressing agreement are less frequent than DMs with metalinguistic functions like reformulation or online planning.<sup>23</sup>

Most of these markers appear at the initial level. We have found the following: *ya* (2), *bueno*, *claro*.

We will not deal extensively with these DMs as they do not constitute the focus of this paper, but we will just give some examples to show how code-switching works in expressing agreement. In the case of Sp. *ya* (ex. 10 and 11), the function as DM derives from its adverbial use to express present tense (*ya* can also express past and future tense) but mostly from its ability to signal that something that was not happening before is happening. As a result of the

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<sup>23</sup> For example, we have found 3 occurrences of Sp. *bueno* with the function of introducing a new discursive topic or subtopic in conversation and 1 occurrence with the function of summing up; 8 occurrences implying online planning, i.e. to take time to plan the ongoing discourse (and one more occurrence under the form of *buono*, which is a literal translation of *bueno*, because It. *buono* [good] does not function as a DM) and 8 occurrences with reformulation functions (cf. Borreguero 2017, Borreguero et al. 2017).

change in the situation, the expectation that nothing was going to change is rejected, as in *Ya llega el tren* [*The train is already arriving*] (cf. Bazzanella et al. 2005: 67-74). *Ya* is mainly used as a DM to acknowledge understanding. This function is a result of a grammaticalisation process: the speaker informs the interlocutor that his/her words in the previous turn have produced a change in his/her knowledge, but the idea of a change taking place (not in fact but in mental representations) is still there. This is what can be observed in (11) and (12), where, besides the phatic function, it is easy to observe an agreement with the previous turn (the area is expensive and the old city is too big to be visited properly in just one day):

- (11) C: [ti piace que]sta zona // vuoo- / vuoi continuare→  
MJ: ma è molto caro  
C: *ya* ma / [forse se la casa è più piccola] (1VA2, 32-34)

[C: [do you like] this area // do you want to continue  
MJ: but it is too expensive  
C: right but / [maybe if the house is smaller]

- (12) C: e la città vecchia ti ha pi- ti ha piaciuto?  
E: la città vecchia↑/ ooddio!/ l'abbiamo vista così un po' alla svelta  
C: *ya* / soltanto sei un giorno qui! (1VA6, 100-102)

[C: and did you like the old part of the city?  
E: the old part of the city/ Oh my God!/ we saw it a little bit quick C: right / you are only one day here!]

As it has been pointed out by some authors (cf. Martín Zorraquino and Portolés 1999: 4192, Guil in Bazzanella et al. 2005: 71), *ya* expresses a lesser degree of involvement than Sp. *sí* with which it shares both functions (phatic and expressing agreement). In fact, in its holofrastic occurrences it could express either the idea 'I have already understood' or the idea 'I already knew'. In this last case, the agreement is reached based on a common piece of knowledge and the speaker conveys the idea that the information is not new to him/her. This means that his/her interlocutor's previous turn was not informative at all. Therefore, it is less cooperative than other DMs and it is frequently used to take the floor to introduce some information that constitutes an alternative to what has been just said, which indicates clear mitigation functions. For example, in (12), the agreement about the expensiveness of the area is followed by the proposal of living in a smaller house in this same area and not by a proposal of moving to other area, as it would be expected if *ya* would indicate a true agreement.

Another Spanish DM with this function in our corpus is *claro*, one of the most frequent agreement DMs in spoken Spanish. Contrary to what happened with *ya*, *claro* appears in the advanced level but it does not exactly express agreement with a previous turn. According to Solís (2012b: 94-97; 2013: 354), *claro* confirms the predicative relation between a subject and a predicate (as we have seen in (1)) indicating that the agreement is somewhat expectable. It can be considered a common-ground particle (Fischer 2007) because it relates the utterance to an aspect of the common ground. The context surrounding (13) is the discussion about the possibility of sharing the flat with someone else, but E raises the problem that the flat has other rooms, but only two beds. And she does so by asking something that it is clear to her, i.e. that is part of the common ground of both interlocutors: the owner will not buy another bed. *Claro* underlies the fact that she has no doubt about the owner's will and this reinforces the previous statement: the problem are the beds. The best Italian equivalent in this case would probably be *certo*.



- (13) E: § ma ci sono più stanze! / il problemaa / i letti  
P: eh↓§  
E: § perché **claro** / lei vorrà comprare un altro? (5VA2)

[E: but there are more rooms! / the problem / the beds

P: eh

E: because obviously / you would like to buy another one?]

## 6. Conclusions

Expressing agreement DMs play an important function during interaction because they serve the purpose of building the grounding process: they signal the way speakers understand each other's contributions and their position towards the facts expressed in those contributions. DMs are by no means the only technique employed by speakers to build the grounding process and to display understanding: continued attention, acknowledgement resources (such as nodding or using a variety of interjections: *uh-huh*, *hmm*, and *aha*) and actively taking part in the conversation by using verbal and non verbal means, all serve the same purpose. Besides, DMs do not only contribute to the grounding process, but they also refer to the common ground, i.e. the result of the grounding process, the set of relevant assumptions to that particular situation shared by communication partners. Speakers must display their understanding of the common ground to make the utterances interpretable (Fischer 2007). Their fundamental role in both building the grounding process and referring to the common ground explains why these DMs are so frequent in spoken interactions, even in NNSs interactions since the first stages of language acquisition.

Following previous studies, we consider that expressing agreement is not the invariant meaning of any DM, but it is rather a common pragmatic or discursive use of many DMs. In this study, we have focused our attention in Italian DMs and especially in the most frequent DMs in an interlanguage corpus: *d'accordo*, *ok* and *bene* (and its derivate *va bene*). The invariant meaning of these DMs is related to the position the speaker adopts towards his/her utterance: if s/he feels responsible for what s/he has said and if s/he considers that the predicative relation conveyed by the utterance was expectable according to the common ground shared by the participants. That is the invariant meaning of these DMs, which have usually been described by two of their pragmatic uses: to express agreement and to sign reception (phatic cues).

In NS informal interactions, there is no predictable expectation about the tendencies to ratify or to challenge information previously presented by the interlocutor, but in learners' interaction – especially among initial learners – one can expect an overwhelming presence of ratifying utterances and a deliberated avoidance of conflict with the interlocutor. This tendency is based on the scarce linguistic competence and the surely-stressing situations in which the corpus was collected, but it is mainly sustained by the fact that learners find it easier to make the conversation go forward by agreeing with their partner and by being cooperative. This would explain why DMs expressing agreement are more frequent in NNSs than in NSs in our corpus.

From our data, we can conclude that Spanish learners of L2 Italian use a variety of DMs to express agreement with their interlocutor since the very first stages in acquisition. However, the number of DMs with this discourse function does not increase significantly along with the

development of the linguistic and communicative competence. Moreover, there does not seem to be a clear acquisitional path in Spanish learners as the number of DMs does not constantly increase through the three levels, an observation already made for metadiscursive markers in a previous work (Borreguero 2017). Besides, the analysed DMs share one important semantic feature: the commitment of the speaker to some kind of action in the extra linguistic world. In fact, other DMs that can also be used to express agreement but do not involve this commitment (such as It. *infatti*, *in effetti* ‘indeed’, *certo* ‘sure, for sure’) are absent from our learners’ corpus. Nothing is taken for granted, nothing is considered an expectable predicative relationship, everything is open to negotiation and must be positively asserted as such.

Finally, we would like to highlight some interesting differences between NSs and NNSs: phatic uses of these DMs are much more frequent in learners than in NSs and this constitutes a piece of evidence of a greater necessity to explicit the grounding process and the references to the common ground in learners’ interaction, probably linked to the reinforcement of the positive face, which makes the partner confident in his/her speech, especially in symmetric interactions.

The analysis has given us the opportunity to reflect upon different issues. Some of these have a methodological nature and regard the way results can be biased by idiosyncratic production (as in the case of *d’accordo* in the initial stage); or are related to the difficulty of drawing apart grounding functions (such as expressing agreement) from common ground functions (such as phatic functions) when both are fulfilled by the same DM. Others are related to language teaching suggestions drawn from this acquisitional study: As we have seen, DMs are often overused, they assume discursive functions that are not present in NSs speech; their inventory is very reduced and hardly enriched in upper levels; but the necessity of marking understating and agreement is stronger than the capacity to use lexical means in L2 and this explains why learners resort to some L1 DMs. Language teaching should focus on providing learners with a wider range of DMs and in delimiting their functions in interaction, two actions which require explicit attention to these units in the language learning process (cf. Pernas et al. 2011).

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