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The Functions of the Spanish Approximators *Como* and *Como Que* in Institutional and Non-Institutional Discursive Contexts

Las funciones de los aproximadores como y como que en el discurso institucional y no institucional

<https://doi.org/10.1515/soprag-2018-0011>

Abstract: The Spanish approximators *como* and *como que* (“sort of,” “as if,” “kind of,” “seems,” “like”) serve multiple pragmatic functions. They can be employed in similar contexts to express vagueness when speakers experience uncertainty or to hedge and avoid being straightforward. Furthermore, these forms can alternate according to context since they represent two ways of saying the same thing. This study investigated the use of *como* and *como que* in two speech events: narratives of personal experience (non-institutional) and therapeutic interviews (institutional), which were generated by Spanish speakers of several varieties, educational levels, and lengths of residence in the United States. The study was informed by the theoretical frameworks of sociolinguistic and pragmatic variation, and the data were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative approaches. The findings revealed that while *como* was the preferred form among the speakers of the study they employed *como que* more often in the therapeutic interviews. Thus, both discourse and the pragmatic functions conditioned the use of these approximators.

Keywords: Spanish approximators, *como/como que*, socio-pragmatic variation

Resumen: Los aproximadores *como* y *como que* en español cumplen diversas funciones pragmáticas. Pueden ser utilizados en contextos similares para expresar vaguedad cuando los hablantes experimentan incertidumbre o para atenuar y evitar ser directos. Además, estos ítems pueden alternar dependiendo del

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contexto, ya que representan dos formas con el mismo significado. El presente estudio investigó el uso de *como* y *como que* en dos tipos de eventos discursivos: narrativas de experiencia personal (no institucional) y entrevistas terapéuticas (institucional). El corpus se generó mediante muestras de hablantes hispanos de distintas variedades, niveles educativos y años de residencia en los Estados Unidos. Los marcos teóricos de variación sociolingüística y pragmática informaron el estudio, y se utilizó un acercamiento cuantitativo y cualitativo para analizar los datos. Los resultados revelaron que aunque *como* fue la forma preferida por los hablantes, *como que* se expresó con más frecuencia en las entrevistas terapéuticas. Por consiguiente, tanto el discurso como la función pragmática condicionaron el uso de dichos aproximadores.

Palabras claves: Aproximadores en español, *como/como que*, variación sociopragmática

1 Introduction

The approximators *como* and *como que* (“sort of,” “as if,” “kind of,” “seems,” “like”) are lexical items that convey vagueness. They are employed to modify the certainty of an expression when speakers may not have sufficient information (e. g. Cuervo, 1954; Hengeveld & Keizer, 2011; Mihatsch, 2009; Said-Mohand, 2006, 2008; Trujillo Carreño, 1990). Furthermore, *como* and *como que* have been found to attenuate the content of an utterance when a speaker does not want to be perceived as too direct or straightforward (e. g. Albelda, Briz, Cestero, Kotwica, & Villalba, 2014; Briz, 2003, 2007; Haverkate, 1994; Montecino, 2004). Camacho (2011) has further suggested that these forms are used by speakers of different Spanish varieties and in several contexts to indicate that the speaker is not willing to commit to the content of the constituent the approximators modify. However, these lexical forms are context dependent and may differ in use among speakers of Spanish varieties and among the discursive events in which they are produced.

Based on the concept of linguistic variation (Labov, 1972, 2004, 2011), Camacho (2011, p. 8) posits that *como que* has become lexicalized as a free variant of *como* and that “*como que* seems to have become a compound, and *que* does not contribute anything either syntactically or semantically to the whole sequence”. Consider examples (1a) and (2a) produced by two speakers of our study, in which *como* and *como que* can alternate without changing the meaning or the grammaticality of the sentence. Examples (1b) and (2b) illustrate how the alternation between the two forms is plausible.

Example 1

A speaker makes a negative observation about the behavior of a group of people:

- a. *¿Y qué hacen los testigos de Jehová? Se ponen más fuerte como a rezar ahí, es un trip (sic).*
- b. *¿Y qué hacen los testigos de Jehová? Se ponen más fuerte como que a rezar ahí, es un trip (sic).*

“And what do Jehovah’s witnesses do? They start to *sort of* pray louder there; it’s a trip.”

Example 2

A speaker suggests how he may increase his job-hunting approach:

- a. *Sí, tal vez como que buscar más opciones, tocar, pues, más puertas.*
- b. *Sí, tal vez como buscar más opciones, tocar, pues, más puertas.*

“Yes, maybe *kind of* search for more options, knock on, well, more doors.”

Since both of these forms compete in similar linguistic environments, the aim of this study then is to uncover the sociolinguistic and pragmatic factors that condition the use of one form over the other and to uncover whether the speech event may condition their expression. To our knowledge, there is an absence of research that investigates the use of the approximators *como* and *como que* in various Spanish varieties and spontaneous speech using both sociolinguistic and pragmatic variationist approaches. Also, the expression of *como* and *como que* has not been examined in one study using different discursive environments. This study, therefore, advances our understanding of these approximators and their functions among several Spanish varieties in two categories of spontaneous speech: narratives of personal experience (i. e. non-institutional discourse) and therapeutic motivational interviews (i. e. institutional discourse).

2 Literature review

Como and *como que* have been known to serve multiple functions. One of the functions these forms serve is that of approximators. As approximators, *como* and *como que* can be employed to convey, depending on context, uncertainty, proximity, or resemblance (e. g. Channell, 1994; Jiménez Juliá, 2003). Thus, approximators are used to convey vagueness. For instance, Channell (1994) has suggested that there are various means by which speakers convey vagueness: By implicature, by choice of vague words, and by vague additives. Channel

maintains that vagueness by implicature arises from the notion that even apparently precise phrases can be interpreted as having vague meanings. Vagueness by choice of words consists of lexical items that are intrinsically vague (e. g. *thingy*, *thingummy*, *whatnot*). On the other hand, vague additives (e. g. *like*, *around*, *kind of*, *sort of*) represent lexical items that alter the degree of certainty or straightforwardness of the constituents they modify. The Spanish approximators *como* and *como que* belong to this latter category. Fant (2007) has suggested that these forms tend to modulate and adapt the reference so that it fits the conceptual content that the speaker wishes to express.

Crystal (1995) has suggested that imprecision is part of everyday language as definitions of lexical items are not always clear and determinate. According to Mihatsch (2007), even though accuracy in discourse is important, in many contexts speakers cannot express what they wish by only relying on conventional lexical meanings. For this reason, approximators such as *como* and *como que* are commonly employed. That is, approximators as these convey what Lakoff (1973, p. 458) coined “fuzzily defined boundaries” rather than “sharply defined” ones.

Several researchers who have investigated *como* and *como que* have noted that these forms represent linguistic resources that allow speakers to reduce the certainty of an expression (e. g. Cuervo, 1954; Hengeveld & Keizer, 2011; Mihatsch, 2009; Said-Mohand, 2006, 2008; Trujillo Carreño, 1990) or to soften or attenuate the content of an utterance (e. g. Albelda et al., 2014; Briz, 2003, 2007; Haverkate, 1994; Montecino, 2004). Thus, these forms, depending on the context, Spanish variety, and discursive setting, can be employed as strategies to avoid fully committing to the true meaning of a proposition when there is lack of information or lack of direct evidence (e. g. Camacho, 2011; Said-Mohand, 2006, 2008).

In addition to the previously mentioned function related to vagueness, *como* and *como que* also serve other grammatical functions which this study does not address. For instance, Jiménez Juliá (2003, p. 117) posits that *como* is “one of the most versatile particles in Spanish”, which suggests that expressing approximation is simply one of its several uses. *Como* may also be used as an interrogative or exclamatory pronoun, as a conditional conjunction, as a comparative adverb, or as a quotative (Camacho, 2011; Hernando Cuadrado, 2002; Jiménez Juliá, 2003; Kern, 2014; Moreno Ayora, 1991; Said-Mohand, 2006; Schwenter, 2001; Trujillo Carreño, 1990 among others).

That said, one way of distinguishing the approximator function of *como* and *como que* from their other possible grammatical and discursive functions is by examining the speakers’ communicative intention in using these approximators.

Concerning the speech events in which we examine the alternation between *como* and *como que* (i. e. oral narratives of personal experience and an institutional discourse of therapeutic interviews), we maintain that both interactional

discourses represent natural, spontaneous speech. Therefore, the study examines the uses of the approximators in similar naturalistic interactions but different interactional settings.

Following Hymes (2005), we define *speech events* as activities that follow the rules for the use of speech. In other words, speech events are established based on the use of language. For instance, Duranti (1985) noted that there are events in which speech is crucial for them to take place, such as class lectures or phone conversations. This aspect is also the case for narratives and therapeutic interviews since both events are manifested through speech and are characterized by specific uses of language. Concerning the oral narratives of personal experience and, following a sociolinguistic framework, our study centered on identifying several of the linguistic and social variables that mediate the use of these forms. The reasoning behind the use of oral narratives was that these were found to reduce the effects of observation to a minimum (Labov, 2001). Since narratives are delivered with a similar organization in a wide variety of societies and cultures, we found the discourse to be fit for an examination of *como* and *como que*.

The corpus in which we also exemplify the use of these approximators relies on what is known as *Institutional Talk*. In particular, the use of *como* and *como que* was extracted from what is called “Motivational Interviews” (MIs) in which the therapist reviews adherence to treatment and the status of the clients’ well-being. These interviews are known as a change-inducing strategy, a modality that aims at enhancing client motivation towards change (Von Wormer, 2007). Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2005, p. 13) defined *institutional discourse* as “spontaneous authentic language use by speakers who are speaking as themselves, in genuine situations, with socio-affective consequences”. That is, this discourse is not motivated by experimental prompts (e. g. discourse completion tasks) that lead the speakers to respond in a specific manner. Agar (1985) maintains that these discourses are characterized as instances in which one person who represents an institution encounters another to provide a service. Agar (1985, p. 149) also notes that institutional discourse has to accomplish three things: Diagnose the client, provide a limited number of ways to describe people, their problems, and the solutions (i. e. institutional frames), and shape the discourse of the institutional representative so that it adheres to the client’s ways of talking.

3 Theoretical frameworks

We have noted here that the approximators *como* and *como que* are known to convey vagueness in oral discourse because the content of the constituents they

modify is not made exact and precise (Channell, 1994). Fuentes Rodríguez (2008) has further pointed out that forms such as *como* and *como que* present information that is inexact but close to the truth and allow speakers to voluntarily introduce both imprecision and proximity at the same time. Such imprecision can be motivated by the need to modify the certainty of an expression due to insufficient information, or by the desire to attenuate the content of an utterance in order to avoid being too direct.

Given the aforementioned observations, which have posited that the approximators *como* and *como que* compete in similar linguistic environments, serve similar discursive functions, convey similar meanings, and are pervasive in speech, the problem we investigate is the following: Do speakers exhibit preferences in the use of one of these forms?

To approach this problem, the present study was informed by two frameworks: Variationist sociolinguistics (Labov, 1972) and variational pragmatics (Schneider & Barron, 2008). As noted by Labov (1972, 2004, 2011), variationist research examines the different forms that represent ways of saying the same thing (i. e. variants) and aims to uncover the conditions that influence the use of one variant over the other. Thus, for the sociolinguistic framework, we focused on determining the linguistic and external variables (i. e. educational attainment, Spanish variety, and years of residence in the U.S.) that may condition the use of the variants under examination. For the pragmatic variational framework, we attended to the situational and linguistic factors (e. g. discursive interaction, power relations, distance) that characterize each speech event under examination, to address the different pragmatic meanings conveyed by *como* and *como que* (Schneider & Barron, 2008). It should be noted that while variation has been attested in sociolinguistic research (e. g. syntactic, phonological), variation at the discourse-pragmatic level has not received similar attention. In particular, matters in pragmatic variation have been examined regarding regional differences in one or more varieties of a language and, Schneider and Barron (2008) have called for empirical work such as studies conducted by Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2005). Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2005, pp. 192–193) define socio-pragmatic variation as the way in which speakers “vary their use of language in similar situational contexts with similar communicative purposes and thus exhibit different interactional features/patterns”, which remains one of the goals of this study.

With this in mind, our study was guided by the following questions:

1. Do speakers exhibit a preference in the use of the approximators *como* and *como que*? And, if a preference exists, is it conditioned by the speech event in which they are employed (i. e. oral narratives as opposed motivational interviews (MIs))?

2. Can we detect whether the use of *como* and *como que* is conditioned by external variables, such as Spanish variety, years of residence in the U.S. (i. e. exposure to English), and the educational level of the speakers?
3. Are the pragmatic functions of the approximators (e. g. conveying uncertainty) conditioned by the discursive setting in which they are produced?

4 Method

4.1 Data collection procedures

Several steps had to be taken to investigate the use of *como* and *como que* and respond to the research questions. First, we needed to determine an envelope of variation since Jiménez Juliá (2003) has noted the versatility of the Spanish particle *como* and suggested that expressing approximation is only one of its several uses. Therefore, as a first step, we operationalized and made a distinction between the approximators *como* and *como que* from their other non-approximator functions, functions which are not the kernel of this current study. A second step was to select two different discursive contexts to examine the uses of *como* and *como que* since these forms have been mostly investigated using sociolinguistic interviews (e. g. Kern 2014; Said-Mohand 2006, 2008).

Thus, the corpus consisted of oral narratives of personal experience and therapeutic motivational interviews, which represent two different speech events. Concerning the oral narratives, we followed the Labovian sociolinguistic framework in which the speakers were asked to recount an important event in their lives. The narratives were digitally recorded and later transcribed by the researchers. We should note that we defined these narratives, following Franke (2011, p. 46), as a communicative action that implies “relative freedom of verbal actions”, similar to what we find in everyday monologues or conversations. For the institutional discourse, we followed Heritage (2004) who suggested that these discourses are framed by conventions and procedures that are specific to the institutional context. That is, institutional discourse is a category of communication that involves “specific goal orientations that are tied to their institution-relevant identities ...” (Heritage, 2004, p. 6). To this end, we examined the use of *como* and *como que* in motivational interviews (MIs) in which speakers responded to questions issued by a therapist regarding their treatment. MIs are known as client-centered interactions in which a therapist seeks to analyze behavioral change in a client (Miller & Rollnick, 2002, p. 25). For instance, Von Wormer (2007) has noted that the MI approach is client or participant-

centered in the sense that most of the statements concerning the problems of a participant are elicited by the client. Furthermore, MIs contain more open-ended questions and reflective listening on the part of the therapist (Amrhein, Miller, Yahne, Palmer, & Fulcher, 2003, p. 862).

Unlike the oral narratives and, based on the nature of the institutional discourse, another set of measures had to be followed. First, we had to obtain institutional review board permission from the medical facility which was administered by a public university. Second, for privacy reasons, we could not interview the clients. Rather, the therapist conducted the interviews with the purpose of evaluating medication intake and mental health improvement. Then, the digital recordings were forwarded and transcribed by the researchers. Only general information regarding each client's age, gender, Spanish variety, educational attainment, and years residing in the U.S. was shared in addition to the interview recordings. Thus, strict guidelines were followed. In brief, all the recordings were transcribed by the researchers and, we note here that as researchers we were representative of two Spanish varieties: Caribbean and Mexican, the varieties spoken by the majority of the study's participants (18 of the 21 speakers).

4.2 Data analysis and envelope of variation

Since this study attended to the use of the approximators *como* and *como que* only in instances in which they could alternate and conveyed the same meaning, an envelope of variation had to be determined. For instance, tokens containing other uses of these forms such as those illustrated in the following examples were excluded from the analyses¹:

- (a) Tokens in which these forms were used as the focus *like* (e. g. *¿Qué confianza tiene usted? Entre el uno y el diez, diez siendo como bastante confianza.* “How confident are you? From one to ten, ten being *like* very confident.”).
- (b) Instances in which the two competing forms exhibited phonological differences (e. g. suprasegmental features such as stress) in the recordings since, in these contexts, the alternation was not found plausible, and approximation was not being conveyed (e. g. *¡Imagínate cómo está esa gente!* “Imagine *how* these people are doing!”).

¹ The reader is advised to see Schwenter (2001) with respect to Spanish *como* conditionals and Borzi (2008) for *como* as a causal connector. For a comparative discussion on the uses of *como* and *like* see Jørgensen and Stenström (2009). Also, refer to Said-Mohand (2006) for a discussion on the use of *como* and *como que* in comparative and interrogative contexts, and see Kern (2014) for the use of these forms as quotatives.

- (c) Tokens of *como* when used to express the conditional mood (e. g. *Como repruebes otra vez hablaré con el profesor*. “If you fail again I will talk to the professor.”).
- (d) Instances in which *como* appeared in comparative utterances (e. g. *¡Estás nomás tragando pastillas como un pollo!* “You are just swallowing pills like a chicken!”).
- (e) Interrogative utterances (e. g. *Entonces yo decía: “¿Cómo brego con esto?”* So I “used to say: ‘How do I deal with this?’”).
- (f) Utterances in which the forms were issued as the quotative *like* in English were removed from the analysis (e. g. “*Y cuando miras para atrás es como: “¡Wow! ¡Esto siempre ha sido así!”* “And when you look back it’s like: ‘Wow! This has always been this way!’”).

After removing similar and abovementioned tokens from the entire corpus in which *como* and *como que* were not employed as approximators nor represented a site in which the alternation was plausible, the total number of tokens was then reduced from 1,480 to 473.²

The following examples generated by the corpus are illustrative of the tokens that we entered into the analysis:

Example 3

A speaker expresses doubt about the next steps to take regarding his life:

Me sentía como con ganas de hacer algo, pero no sabía ni qué hacer.

“(I) felt *as if* (I) wanted to do something, but (I) didn’t even know what to do.”

Example 4

A speaker explains how her child became rebellious after being in the U.S.:

Ahorita, después de un poco acá, él se me había puesto como que rebelde.

“Now, after a short time here, he started acting *kind of* rebellious.”

Example 5

A narrator describes her trajectory through Portugal:

En la cercanía había como una fábrica de corcho y te daba ese olor también.

Y era fascinante.

“In the vicinity, there was *kind of* a cork factory, and there was that smell too. And it was fascinating.”

² While we considered the final number of tokens small, this sample still yielded statistical significance and thus, we proceeded to add a qualitative component with the purpose of triangulating data and providing a more robust depiction of the tendencies generated.

Example 6

A narrator describes how difficult it was to identify where she was:

Y hay como que humo y es difícil encontrar su camino.

“And there is *like* smoke, and it is difficult to find your way.”

The entire corpus of the study consisted of ten oral narratives of personal experience and from 11 MI therapy sessions. The participants were all residents of New York and New Jersey, and their ages ranged from 19–45. The participants’ speech samples, randomly selected from a larger corpus, were representative of several Spanish varieties: Mexican (3), Dominican (2), Puerto Rican (11), Argentinean (1), Cuban (2), Colombian (1), and Honduran (1).

To conduct the quantitative analysis we used the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS). Chi-Square tests of independence were performed to determine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between the use of *como* and *como que* and the variables related to the discursive event (i. e. narratives or interviews), Spanish variety (i. e. Mexican, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Argentinean, Cuban, Colombian, or Honduran), educational attainment (i. e. high school or university), and years of residence in the U.S. (i. e. born in the U.S., less than 10 years in the U.S., more than 10 years in the U.S.).

To respond to the study’s research questions, we employed two methodological approaches: A quantitative analysis which yielded data regarding the frequency and the distribution of *como* and *como que* according to the discourse and according to aforementioned external variables. After conducting the quantitative analysis, we then proceeded to examine the corpus using a qualitative approach with the purpose of capturing the different pragmatic functions of the approximators according to the discourse.

5 Findings

In this section, we first address our research questions by way of a quantitative analysis. In the subsequent section, we provide a qualitative analysis. Research question one focused on whether the use of *como* and *como que* would differ according to the discourse (i. e. speech event). The second question inquired whether the use of *como* and *como que* was conditioned by social/external variables.

5.1 Findings: The quantitative analysis

This section addresses the intersection between several linguistic and social variables concerning the use of *como* and *como que*. We report on the statistical significance in the results of the cross-tabulations conducted in the study in order to address whether there is a correlation between the variables being examined.

5.1.1 The use of *como* and *como que* according to the type of discourse

To respond to the first research question that inquires about the use of *como* and *como que* according to the discourse (i. e. narrative vs. motivational interviews), we present Table 1 which illustrates the patterns in the use of the approximators in each type of speech event.

Table 1: The distribution of *como/como que* according to speech event (n = 473).

Discourse	Approximator		Total
	<i>Como</i>	<i>Como que</i>	
Narratives	75.0 % (72)	25.0 % (24)	100.0 % (96)
MIs	54.6 % (206)	45.4 % (171)	100.0 % (377)
Total	58.8 % (278)	41.2 % (195)	100.0 % (473)

(p = 0.000)

A Chi-Square test of independence was performed to determine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between the use of *como* and *como que* and the variable related to the discourse. A significant correlation was found (p = 0.000). Thus, we make several observations from Table 1. First, and in general, we find that *como* was the preferred form in narratives and interviews, representing 58.8 % of the tokens. More specifically, 75.0 % of the tokens were issued using *como* in the narratives and, 54.6 % in the interviews. In other words, we uncovered a preference to use *como* among the speakers in both discursive contexts. Second, *como que* was issued at a higher frequency (45.5 %) in the MIs when compared to its use in the narratives (25.0 %). That is, the discourse setting (i. e. speech event) conditioned the use of these forms.

To further illustrate these findings, Figure 1 presents the overall preference in the use of *como* over *como que* in both discourse categories and further shows the frequent use of *como que* in the MIs rather than in narratives.

As seen in Figure 1, *como* was issued more frequently in narratives and interviews. However, *como que* was employed more frequently (almost double) in the MIs than in narratives. We address this latter finding in more detail in the qualitative analysis.

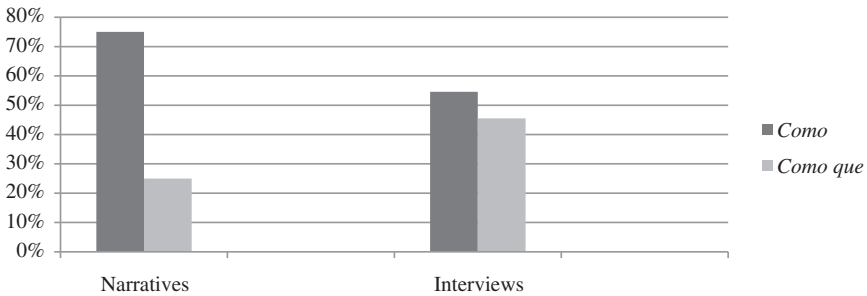


Figure 1: The use of *como/como que* in the narratives and MIs.

5.1.2 The use of *como* and *como que* according to social/external variables

Our second research question focused on the relationship between the use of the approximators and several external variables: Speakers' Spanish variety, educational attainment, and years of residence in the U.S. We first examine how *como* and *como que* were employed by speakers of each variety represented in the study. We explain these findings with a note of caution since a random sampling method of speakers within the corpus produced only a few speakers of several of the varieties. Nonetheless, we found a statistically significant relationship between the use of the approximators and the speakers' Spanish variety at a p value of 0.000. In other words, the variety of speaker conditions the use of these forms.

Table 2 reveals a pattern in the use of the approximators. For instance, of the 118 tokens issued by the Mexican speakers, 72% were produced using *como*. A similar pattern can also be found among the Puerto Rican and Colombian speakers. That is, speakers of the Puerto Rican variety produced this form in 71.3% of the instances in which *como que* could have been expressed and, the speakers of the Colombian variety, 84.0%. Therefore, we can suggest at this juncture that speakers of these varieties tend to favor the use *como* more than *como que*.

Table 2: The distribution of *como/como que* according to speakers' variety (n = 473).

Speakers' variety	Approximator		Total
	<i>Como</i>	<i>Como que</i>	
Mexican	72.0 % (85)	28.0 % (33)	100.0 % (118)
Dominican	41.4 % (12)	58.6 % (17)	100.0 % (29)
Puerto Rican	71.3 % (77)	28.7 % (31)	100.0 % (108)
Argentinean	50.0 % (5)	50.0 % (5)	100.0 % (10)
Cuban	44.0 % (74)	56.0 % (94)	100.0 % (168)
Colombian	84.0 % (21)	16.0 % (4)	100.0 % (25)
Honduran	28.6 % (2)	71.4 % (5)	100.0 % (7)
Total	58.8 % (278)	41.2 % (195)	100.0 % (473)

(p = 0.000)

Conversely, the speakers of the Dominican, Cuban, and the only Honduran varieties preferred the use of *como que*. For instance, the Dominicans preferred *como que* in 58.8% of the utterances under examination, the Cuban speakers 56.6%, and the only Honduran speaker 71.4%, although this speaker produced few instances of this form.

In sum, and with some reservation, we can suggest that we attested to differences in the use of *como* vs. *como que* according to Spanish variety. Interestingly, and with regard to the speakers who identified as speakers of the Argentinean variety, we cannot claim any preference since they produced few tokens and these were evenly distributed among the approximators under investigation.

Our second research question also attended to another external variable, educational attainment, and whether education conditioned speakers' use of the approximators.

As Table 3 shows, the p-value of 0.462 suggests that the results of this analysis are not robust. We can observe that *como* remains as the preferred form and, that it was used in close frequencies by speakers with high school and university-level education, 60.5% and 57.2% respectively. A similar pattern can be detected with the use of *como que* (39.5% and 42.8% respectively). Thus, we

Table 3: The distribution of *como/como que* according to speakers' education ($n = 473$).

Education attainment	Approximator		Total
	<i>Como</i>	<i>Como que</i>	
High School	60.5 % (135)	39.5 % (88)	100.0 % (223)
University	57.2 % (143)	42.8 % (107)	100.0 % (250)
Total	58.8 % (278)	41.2 % (195)	100.0 % (473)

(p = 0.462)

do not find a strong indication which suggests that a speaker's education constrains the use of these approximators.

Based on the literature regarding how English contact may influence the uses of other linguistic forms (Otheguy, 2013, among others), we took into consideration another external variable: Years of living in the U.S. We operated under the assumption that the amount of years living in the U.S. directly or indirectly exposes the speakers to English contact. Therefore, the reasoning behind this variable was to determine whether we may be able to detect if English contact may influence the use of these forms even though we excluded, among other cases, instances in which *como* conveyed the meaning of the English focus *like* or as the English quotative *like*. A chi-square value ($p = 0.009$) suggests that there is a statistically significant relationship between this variable (i. e. years of living in the U.S.) and the use of *como* and *como que*. Nonetheless, several inconsistencies emerged in this analysis which we elucidate in Table 4.

Table 4: The distribution of *como/como que* according to speakers' years in the U.S. ($n = 473$).

Years in the U.S.	Approximator		Total
	<i>Como</i>	<i>Como que</i>	
Less than 10	68.9 % (51)	31.1 % (23)	100.0 % (74)
More than 10	55.7 % (214)	44.3 % (170)	100.0 % (384)
Born in the U.S.	86.7 % (13)	13.3 % (2)	100.0 % (15)
Total	58.8 % (278)	41.2 % (195)	100.0 % (473)

(p = 0.009)

A careful examination of Table 4 suggests that, with regard to *como*, the speakers who were born in the U.S. generally expressed this approximator in higher frequencies (86.7%) than the speakers who lived in the U.S. more than ten years (55.7%). This finding would suggest that the longer speakers live in the U.S., the more likely they are to use this form. However, a contradiction emerged in these data in that the speakers who had lived in the U.S. *less* than ten years exhibit an even higher frequency in the use of *como* (68.9%) than speakers who have lived in the U.S. *more* than ten years (55.7%). Therefore, we cannot fully confirm that these tendencies may be suggestive of English contact since there is no apparent increase in the use of these forms that correlates with years of English contact. Furthermore, we do not have sufficient evidence to claim that the use of *como* and *como que* resembles the discourse marker or quotative *like* in English since we excluded this function while defining the envelope of variation as it was not representative of a site in which the alternation could occur with *como que*.

We also find a similar discrepancy with the patterns exhibited for *como que*: Speakers born in the U.S. exhibit lower frequency (13.3%) in using this form when compared to the participants who lived in the U.S. for more than ten years (44.3%). Figure 2 is illustrative of these inconsistent patterns.

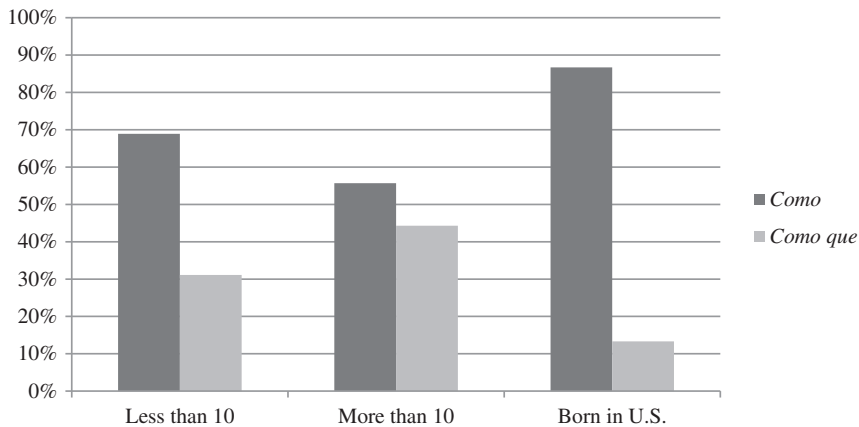


Figure 2: The use of *como/como que* according to the speakers' years in the U.S.

Based on Figure 2, we can only suggest that the speakers in our study who were born in the U.S. show a stronger preference to use *como*, not *como que*. The figure also shows the inconsistencies regarding the speakers who had lived in the U.S. more than ten years as opposed to those born in the U.S. That is,

speakers born in the U.S. tend to disfavor the use of *como que*. Therefore, further investigation is needed before we can suggest that there may be a semantic convergence in the use of *como* since we do evidence a higher frequency in use of this approximator. However, with regard to *como que*, we cannot make the same claim.

5.2 The results of the qualitative analysis

This section examines the use of the approximators and their pragmatic functions. In it, we exemplify the uses of these forms in their respective discursive environments.

5.2.1 Pragmatic functions of the approximators according to the discursive setting

Our third research question inquired about the different pragmatic functions of the approximators according to the discourse. We approached this research question by way of a qualitative analysis. We first present excerpts gathered from the MIs and then from the narratives. In what follows, each excerpt is contextualized and identified as belonging to a narrative or an MI.

Example 7 (Client MI 14)

In an MI, a client (C), who has HIV, shared his thoughts on the possibility of dying. However, the client had some difficulty finding the words to express his thoughts.

C: *A veces me pongo a pensar: “esto es una enfermedad que mata”. Pero al mismo tiempo digo: “pero no me va a matar ahora”. ... A veces, fijese que me pongo a pensar, porque la vida es como que un poquito, cómo le digo, eh, no se puede entender a veces. No sé cómo explicarlo, pero he visto personas que mueren. Como ejemplo, en donde yo trabajo murió un muchacho de 20 años de un accidente, y digo yo- lo vi en el periódico- y digo: “¡wow! 20 años y no murió de ninguna enfermedad”.*

C: “Sometimes I think: “this is a disease that kills.” But at the same time (I) say: “but (it) is not going to kill me now”. ... Sometimes, look, I start thinking because life is *kind of* a little, how can I tell you? hum, (it) cannot be understood sometimes. (I) don’t know how to explain it, but I have seen people who die. For example, where I work, a 20-year-old young man died in an accident, and I say- I saw it in the newspaper- and I say: “wow! 20 years old and (he) didn’t die of

any disease’.”

In example 7, the client employed the approximator *como que* to express, in a vague manner, that life can be difficult to understand sometimes. By using the approximator *como que*, the client also softened the message and avoided making a direct statement with regard to how he perceived life. We should note that other uses of *como* in the excerpt (e. g. *cómo le digo* “how can I tell you?”) may contribute to conveying vagueness, however, the form *como que* was only entered in the analysis since it was used as an approximator while the other instances of *como* were not approximators.

Example 8 (Client MI 08)

The purpose of this interaction was to determine whether the client had been taking his medication. In the excerpt, we find that the therapist (T) and a client (C) were discussing what a doctor recommended him to do to decrease the medication’s side effects. The therapist attempted to reformulate what the doctor had recommended, and he expressed this notion with uncertainty.

C: *Le dije lo que me pasaba, los efectos secundarios, y me dijo: “mira tienes que tomarlo con unas galletitas, algo para que no te caiga tan pesado y tienes que comer más cosas, más vegetales”.*

T: *Ya, ya. Y eso es como que algo que usted ha estado pendiente también, para controlar eso un poquito.*

C: “I told (her) what was happening to me, the side effects, and (she) told me: “look, (you) have to take it with some cookies, something so that it is not so heavy, and (you) have to eat more things, more vegetables”.

T: Ok, ok. And that is the *kind of* something that you have been paying attention to also, to control that a little bit.”

To reformulate what the doctor had recommended to his client and to determine whether the client was adhering to treatment, the therapist issued *como que* to downgrade the degree of commitment to the content of the utterance and, to speculate whether the client was following the doctor’s advice. In other words, the therapist used this form to avoid being straightforward.

Example 9 (Therapist MI 14)

In discussing the client’s treatment, the therapist provided a comparison between taking depression medication and taking antibiotics with the purpose of illustrating that treatments should be completed as indicated by the doctor.

T: *Me parece que usted entiende bastante bien sobre su tratamiento. Que muchas veces es que uno toma un antibiótico por más tiempo de lo que fue indicado para*

como que prevenir que la infección regrese. A la misma vez, me parece que usted entiende que con tomarlo por una cantidad de tiempo, eh, previene una recaída.

T: “It seems to me that you understand pretty well your treatment. That many times one takes an antibiotic for a longer time than it was prescribed to *sort of* prevent that the infection comes back. In the same way, it seems to me that you understand that taking it for a period of time, um, prevents a relapse.”

The initial statement, *Me parece que usted entiende bastante bien*, is representative of how the therapist mitigated his message, which was checking to see if the client was taking his medications. Furthermore, in an attempt to verify medication intake and, at the same time motivate continuity, the therapist issued *como que* to indirectly convey how adherence to medication was important since it could prevent relapsing into a depression. In other words, the therapist hedged a directive by using *como que*.

Example 10 (Client MI 20)

A client reflected on how being close to his therapists had a positive impact on his improvement.

C: *Yo espero con el favor de Dios que todo me vaya bien. Y bue (sic), déjame decirte que la terapia de xxx y la tuya me han sentado muchísimo, porque me siento como que en familia. Tú sabes, y yo digo: “Ay, mira a lo que yo he llegado”. Yo le tenía miedo a salir a la calle, a hablar con las personas, cuando la depresión.*

C: “I wish with God’s favor that everything goes well. And well, let me tell you that the therapy with xxx and yours have helped a lot because I feel *sort of* at home. You know, and I say: “Oh, look where I am now”. I was scared of going out to the street, to speak to people, when I was depressed.”

In example 10, the client shared that he felt comfortable with the therapists. By using the vague term *como que*, the client suggested the therapy sessions resembled a comfortable environment in which he felt at home. The client then provided evidence of some of the aspects of his life that had improved (e. g. *Yo le tenía miedo a salir a la calle*), which he attributed to how comfortable he felt in therapy. Thus, in this example, we attested to the use of *como que* to indicate resemblance between therapy sessions and being in a comfortable environment.

Example11 (Narrative 03)

In a narrative of personal experience, a speaker (S) discussed a trip she had taken to Portugal and how much she ate.

S: *Comía unos churritos y cafecito, e iba para otro lado y encontraba otra tabernita y ahí me sentaba y la verdad es que aumenté como diez libras.*

S: “(I) used to eat some churros and a cup of coffee, and then (I) would go somewhere else and find another tavern and (I) would sit there, and honestly (I) gained *like* ten pounds.”

In example 11, the speaker issued *como* as a numeric approximator. The speaker is not able to recall the exact amount, so she used the approximator to explain how much weight she suspected she had gained during her trip. In this example, the use of *como* to approximate a quantity informs the listener that the actual amount of weight the speaker gained is in the vicinity of ten pounds.

Example 12 (Narrative 30)

A speaker narrated the events that occurred during a first date.

S: *Pasó algo muy extraño. Fue que salimos a dar una vuelta y eran como las 6 de la tarde-para darnos un traguito. ¡Ay, querida! “Un traguito”. El hombre se mandó cuatro gin and tonics, uno detrás del otro, y estaba borracho, pero borracho.*

S: “Something really strange happened. We went out for a walk, and it was *about* 6:00 in the evening- to have a little drink. Ah, dear! “A little drink”. The man drank four gin and tonics, one after the other, and he was drunk, really drunk.”

In example 12, we find the use of *como* to convey an approximate time in which the date took place. It also represents the use of *como* to convey uncertainty or a lapse of memory.

Example 13 (Narrative 15)

The narrative explains the tension a speaker felt when she first arrived in NYC and struggled with her master’s degree studies.

S: *Aprendí mucho de la ciudad en ese tiempo. Todo fue tan- todo fue como un choque. En ese tiempo yo tuve que valerme de lo poco que tenía. Me acuerdo que yo compraba sopas Campbell (sic) y con eso yo comía. Me dormía en el piso con una alfombrita que tenía, un catre, pero estaba contenta.*

S: “I learned a lot about the city during that time. Everything was so- everything was *like* a clash. That time I had to support myself with the little I had. I used to buy Campbell (sic) soups, and that is what I would eat. I would sleep on the floor with a little rug, a cot, but (I) was happy.”

In example 13, the narrator used *como* to express resemblance. That is, she described the tension that she felt between having arrived in NYC and simultaneously doing her master’s degree which resembled or approximated a clash.

Example 14 (Narrative 28)

The speaker narrated how he used to visit recording studios with his father when he was young.

S: *Y yo iba con mi papá a los a los estudios a hacer los discos aquí en Manhattan Yo estoy hablando de los años 50, 60, por ahí. Y se hacían los discos en, como en cube-cubicles (sic).*

S: “And I used to go with my dad to the studios to make the records, here in Manhattan I am talking about the 50s, 60s, around that. And the records were made in, some *sort of* cube- cubicles.”

In this excerpt, we find a narrator’s inability to recall a place (a recording studio) where his father would take him as a child. In an attempt to recall a place, the speaker opted to use *como* to express a lack of exact information regarding the place where the records were made.

With this analysis in mind, we were able to attest to the speakers’ preference to use *como* in narratives in instances in which they were recalling an event, informally recounting an event, had a lapse of memory and, were expressing uncertainty regarding numeric values (e. g. *eran como las 6 de la tarde, fue como un choque, or como en cubicles*). We should note that, after delving in the MI corpus further, we did not find evidence of the use of *como que* + number or numeric values (e. g. *como que cinco pastillas* “about five pills”). Yet, *como que* appeared to be produced in instances in which a client or therapist discussed of feelings, behavior, or aspects related to adherence to treatment (e. g. *porque la vida es como que un poquito ... eeh, no se puede entender a veces, para como que prevenir que la infección regrese, or porque me siento como que en familia*).

In sum, the qualitative analysis substantiates the tendencies observed in the quantitative analysis. Together, the two analyses are suggestive of several linguistic behaviors regarding the speakers of this study:

1. Speakers were found to favor the use of *como* in narratives of personal experience.
2. *Como que* was more pervasively expressed in the MIs.
3. Speakers of several varieties exhibited a preference to use *como*.
4. Speakers born in the U.S. produced *como que* significantly less than the other groups.
5. Educational attainment was not found to condition the use of the approximators.
6. Pragmatic variation was attested in relation to the speech events.

6 Discussion

This study shed light with regard to how Spanish speakers alternate the use of approximators *como* and *como que* to convey vagueness. Our first research question addressed the preferences in the use of *como* and *como que* according to the speech event in which they were employed (i. e. narratives of personal experience vs. motivational interviews). In general, the analyses revealed that *como* was preferred over *como que*. Interestingly, however, we found a more robust tendency in speakers to express *como que* in MI sessions than in the narratives. Therefore, we found a discursive effect concerning the use of these two approximators.

Meillet (1921) has posited that new forms emerge through the formal resemblance to already established ones. In this study, we were able to confirm Camacho's (2011) claim regarding the lexicalization of *como que* as a free variant of *como*. However, our findings suggest that *como* may have increased its frequency of use and functions when compared to *como que*. Nonetheless, we cannot claim that *como* has categorically supplanted *como que* since we found evidence of these forms competing in our corpus. Moreover, we found that *como que* was produced more in the MIs, a finding which may suggest that, while the two forms convey approximation, they may serve distinct discursive-pragmatic functions. That is, *como que* seemed to be employed in instances in which the speakers lacked certainty or expressed belief.

In addition to the abovementioned finding, the second research question examined external factors (i. e. variety, years of residence in the U.S., and educational attainment) to uncover whether these variables conditioned the use of the approximators. With some reservation, the analyses yielded subtle differences in the use of the approximators according to speakers' variety. For instance, we found that speakers from the varieties of the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Cuba exhibited a preference to use *como que* rather than *como*. But it is important to note that we are not referring to national boundaries. Rather, we use the linguistic identifiers provided by the speakers of the study (e. g. dialect) to capture regional zones or Spanish variety following Lipski (1994).

The other social variable, years of residence in the U.S., yielded inconsistencies in that an apparent increase in years of exposure did not correlate to a preference of one form over the other. Thus, we note here that further investigation is required. The data also revealed that educational attainment was not significantly correlated with the use of these forms.

Our third research question addressed the pragmatic functions of the approximators *como* and *como que* in each speech event. The results obtained from the qualitative analysis yielded other findings with regard to the alternation of these forms and how vagueness was conveyed using them. First, we found that in many instances *como* was issued to convey numeric approximation and that both forms were used to convey resemblance and proximity when speakers recalled events in their narratives. These observations were found consistently throughout the corpus of oral narratives of personal experience. Concerning the institutional discourse, we found similar functions. However, we found that the functions of *como* and *como que* were related to the expression of general approximation to convey imprecision (not numeric approximation), to hedge with respect to medication intake, adherence to treatment, and feelings or behavior-related outcomes. Thus, our findings suggest that while both of these forms functioned to convey vagueness, they did not always share similar pragmatic purposes.

Janney (2002, p. 462) has suggested that “vagueness is a particular way of using language” and, we were able to attest to pragmatic variation in the use of the approximators according to discursive contexts. For example, we found that speakers in the MIs sessions may have employed the approximators to avoid being too straightforward when talking about treatments, medication, and improvement, and to express thoughts, feelings, and emotions that were not clear in the speakers’ minds. Or, said differently, we add the notion that indefiniteness of feelings was also conveyed by using the approximators. Conversely, in the oral narratives, the functions of the approximators were related to a possible failure to recollect an event, to loosely recount an event, or informally skip details in narrative segments.

Thus, we suggest here that pragmatic variation emerged in the manner in which speakers expressed vagueness: In oral narratives of personal experience to informally recount aspects of their stories which did not demand preciseness (e. g. details of quality and quantity). However, in the MIs the purpose of the speakers’ use of the approximators may have been to hedge or to avoid providing exact details about their feelings and their improvement. In other words, while the speakers in the narratives employed the approximators to discuss details from past experiences that they could not recall with precision, the speakers in the MIs used these forms mostly to soften the content of their utterances (e. g. to avoid being too straightforward when discussing emotions related to a treatment or a condition).

To explain these differences, we suggest that we look further into what the institutional discursive setting represented. In general, we note here that the motivational interviews represent institutional talk. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2005, p. 13) defined *institutional talk* as “spontaneous authentic language used

by speakers who are speaking as themselves, in genuine situations, with socio-affective consequences". In other words, the use of the approximators may have been motivated by the consequences of feeling very exposed while discussing feelings related to treatment or medication, or not wanting to be perceived as too direct. We can also add that they were sharing their beliefs and confidence in the treatment, in the case of the use of *como que*. For instance, Agar (1985) maintained that institutional discourse accomplishes three things: First, the institution must diagnose the client. Second, the institution identifies specific clients, their problems, and the solutions (i. e. institutional frames). Third, there is a diagnosis, the part of the discourse where a representative adheres to the client's ways of talking. Clients, on the other hand, come to an institution with a variety of ways of thinking about themselves, their problems, etc. Thus, the use of the approximators could have been constrained by the speech event, which involved an interaction that is inherent in a therapy session and the power relations between client and therapist.

To this end, we add that, to fully explain what prompts speakers to use approximators we need to align these results with Grice's (1975) maxim of quantity and quality. The maxim of quantity suggests that speakers should make their contribution as informative as required by the context. That is, approximators can be employed to provide the *right amount* of information that the speaker can recall when he or she does not have full access to specific details. With regard to the maxim of quality, which states that a contribution must be as *truthful* as possible, we add that approximators allow speakers to communicate the best way they can, even when the content they have in mind is not clear and determinate.

In addition to using approximators when there is lack of information or direct evidence, Channell (1994) argued that speakers might employ approximators when they deliberately withhold information in situations where there is no desire to fully commit to the information that is given, as we were able to attest in the therapy sessions. Furthermore, speakers may use approximators to avoid being perceived as too direct or too straightforward (i. e. thus they mitigate an utterance), all accounts of what was evidenced in the interview sessions. To substantiate these observations from a linguistic perspective, we note here that in a study of commitment language, Amrhein et al. (2003) documented different patterns of commitment strengths among client groups and, this finding may be suggestive of how approximators may contribute to conveying the strength of commitment of the constituent that follows *como* and *como que*.

Based on the findings of this study, we note that there is no quantitative clear-cut bifurcated pattern in the use of these approximators. Rather, we found patterns and preferences. Therefore, we would like to add a concern related to

epistemic modality. Following Halliday (1970), a common thread we found with the use of *como* and *como que* is that they reflected speakers' assessments and attitudes towards their thoughts and propositions. In several instances, we found that speakers used these forms to express their degree of certainty regarding the content of a proposition and, in others we found that they expressed the speakers' attitude.

7 Conclusion

This study was set out to investigate the use of the approximators *como* and *como que* in various Spanish varieties and spontaneous speech (i. e. narratives of personal experience and MIs) using both sociolinguistic and pragmatic variationist approaches. As we mentioned earlier, and to our knowledge, the Spanish approximators discussed here have not been fully examined in a study that investigates sociolinguistic and pragmatic variation and in two categories of discourse.

One limitation we uncovered was the number of speakers from different Spanish varieties represented in the study. At this moment, we can only hypothesize that a purposeful rather than random sampling may have yielded different results. That is since the data yielded low frequencies in the use of these forms according to several regional varieties (e. g. Argentinean, Honduran Spanish), more speakers who are representative of these varieties perhaps needed to be included.

Regardless of this limitation, we were able to reveal that the use of approximators generated by the corpus served to convey vagueness but in different ways. For instance, and concerning epistemic modality, the approximators under examination reflected the speakers' sense of probability, their attitudes, and commitment to the propositions. That is, in several instances, we noted gaps in recalling details in the narratives while in others we detected concerns related to negative attitudes towards treatment.

Also, and following Jucker et al. (2003), we found that approximation was expressed frequently, yet it did not interfere with communication. In fact, and as noted by Jucker et al. (2003, p. 1737), using vague expressions “may be more effective than precise ones in conveying the intended meaning of an utterance”. Together with the concerns above related to vagueness, the use of these approximators provided relevant contextual information regarding a speaker's ability to access old information, as well as to express beliefs and manage the degree of commitment the speakers made to their propositions.

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