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The discourse-pragmatic functions of *if/si*-constructions in English and Spanish spoken academic discourse¹

Las funciones pragmático-discursivas de las construcciones introducidas por *if/si* en el discurso académico oral en inglés y español

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Abstract: Although *if/si*-constructions are usually defined as conditional constructions which exhibit cause-consequence patterns, prior research has evidenced that these constructions may fulfil a wider range of discourse-pragmatic functions. In addition, research delving into the uses and functions of these constructions in specific registers is scarce and, moreover, few studies have adopted a contrastive perspective. This paper intends to fill this gap by examining *if/si*-constructions in English and Spanish in a comparable corpus of spoken academic discourse, a register in which conditionals are frequent (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan, 1999, p. 824-825). The theoretical framework is based on the three metafunctions proposed in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014), allowing us to distinguish *if/si*-constructions at the ideational, interpersonal and textual levels. Data are drawn from the spoken academic subcorpora of the British component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB) (Nelson, Wallis and Aarts, 2002) and of the Spanish component of the *Integrated Reference Corpora for Spoken Romance Languages* (C-ORAL-ROM) (Cresti and Moneglia, 2005). Corpus data throw light on the use of these constructions in English and Spanish. Results show that conditionals are used differently in colloquial conversation and in spoken academic discourse.

Keywords: conditional construction, academic discourse, corpus linguistics, ideational, interpersonal

Resumen: Aunque las construcciones introducidas por *if* y *si* se definen normalmente como construcciones condicionales que exhiben un patrón de causa-consecuencia,

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investigaciones previas han evidenciado que estas construcciones pueden tener un rango más amplio de funciones pragmático-discursivas. Además, la investigación que ahonda en los usos y funciones de estas construcciones en registros específicos es escasa y, adicionalmente, pocos estudios han adoptado una perspectiva contrastiva. Este artículo tiene como objetivo contribuir a llenar este vacío examinando construcciones introducidas por *if* y *si* en inglés y español en un corpus comparable de discurso académico oral, un registro en el que las condicionales son frecuentes (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad y Finegan, 1999, p. 824-825). El marco teórico se basa en las tres metafunciones propuestas en la Lingüística Sistémico-Funcional (Halliday y Matthiessen, 2014), lo que nos permite distinguir construcciones introducidas por *if* y *si* en los niveles ideacional, interpersonal y textual. Los datos se extraen de los subcorpus académicos orales del componente británico del *International Corpus of English (ICE-GB)* (Nelson, Wallis y Aarts, 2002) y del componente español del *Integrated Reference Corpora for Spoken Romance Languages (C-ORAL-ROM)* (Cresti y Moneglia, 2005). Los datos de corpus arrojan luz sobre el uso de estas construcciones en inglés y español. Los resultados muestran que las construcciones condicionales se emplean de forma diferente en la conversación coloquial y en el discurso académico oral.

Palabras clave: construcción condicional, discurso académico, lingüística de corpus, ideacional, interpersonal

1. Introduction

Conditional constructions –most frequently introduced by *if* in English, as in (1), and *si* in Spanish, as in (2) – typically express a relation of contingency between two clauses. They usually follow a cause-consequence pattern, in which the protasis –marked in bold type– indicates the cause, and the apodosis –in italics– expresses the consequence. In these constructions “the truth of the proposition in the matrix clause is a consequence of the fulfilment of the condition in the conditional clause” (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik, 1985, p. 1088).

(1) *If the weather is fine*, (then) we will have a barbecue. (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1088)

(2) *Si invierte en nuestra compañía*, obtendrá importantes ganancias. (RAE- ASALE, 2009, p. 3551)

‘If you invest in our company, you will get significant profits’

However, as Declerck and Reed (2001, p. 1) argue, “conditional clauses seem to have many more semantic and pragmatic functions than has hitherto been evident”. Prior research has explored the pragmatic richness of conditional constructions (Ford & Thompson, 1986; Ford, 1997; Lavid, 1998; Montolío Durán, 1999a; Warchal, 2010; Brinton, 2019, among others), showing that these constructions also fulfil various interpersonal and textual functions in discourse. Illustrations of such uses are provided in examples (3) and (4).

(3) Indeed, the only real drawback, if you can call it that, is that people are continually coming up and congratulating us on our victory over England. (Biber et al., 1999, p. 856)

(4) It is a fact that you have refused to take any fee for the work you are doing, if you don't mind my asking? (Biber et al., 1999, p. 857)

Research on conditional constructions from a contrastive perspective is notably scarce. Exceptions are Carter-Thomas (2007), on English and French; Hasselgård (2014), on English and Norwegian; and Lastres-López (2019, 2021), on English, French and Spanish. Similarly, there is also a gap in the literature with regard to the study of these constructions across registers.² While medical discourse (Ferguson, 2001; Carter-Thomas, 2007; Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet, 2008; Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas, 2008) or legal discourse, (Mazzi, 2013; Lastres-López, 2019) have received some scholarly attention, other registers –especially spoken ones– remain largely understudied with respect to conditional constructions.

This paper, therefore, intends to contribute to fill this double gap by exploring the discourse-pragmatic functions of *if/si*-constructions in English and Spanish spoken academic discourse. We restrict our analysis to the two prototypical markers of conditionality –*if* and *si*– given that prior research has shown that the large majority of conditionals in both languages are introduced by such markers (Gabrielatos, 2019, p. 308; Lastres-López, 2019, p. 60). Regarding the selection of the register under examination –spoken academic discourse– the choice is motivated by the relevance of conditionals in this text type. In this respect, Biber et al. (1999, p. 824-825) argue that conditionals are frequent in this register, given that they serve to introduce or develop arguments. Along the same lines, Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet (2008, p. 191) also show that conditionals are a “highly valuable resource in academic discourses, whether spoken or written, as they can be used to hypothesize, hedge, manage interaction with the addressee, and promote or on the contrary circumscribe the scope of research claims”, hence the interest in exploring their discourse-pragmatic functions in this register in particular.

With respect to register variation, Biber (2006, p. 4) also argues that spoken academic discourse tends to be colloquial, as opposed to written academic discourse, which is generally informational. Therefore, a second objective of this paper is to examine to what extent spoken academic discourse is similar to colloquial face-to-face conversation in English and Spanish with regard to conditional constructions. For this purpose, the results provided in this paper for spoken academic discourse will be compared to those discussed in a prior study on face-to-face conversation (Lastres-López, 2021).

The data analysed are extracted from the spoken academic subcorpora of the British component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB) (Nelson et al., 2002) and of the Spanish component of the *Integrated Reference Corpora for Spoken Romance Languages* (C-ORAL-ROM) (Cresti and Moneglia, 2005). Although these corpora have not been compiled using the same sampling frame, their spoken academic subcorpora in particular are largely comparable.

After this introduction, the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 offers a brief review of the literature on the discourse-pragmatic functions of conditionals and

² Following Conrad and Biber (2001) and Biber (2006), among others, the term *register* is employed here as a synonym for genre and text type. It is used to refer to “situationally-defined varieties described for their characteristic lexico-grammatical features” (Biber, 2006, p. 11).

establishes the theoretical framework adopted. Section 3 explains the corpora analysed and the methodology followed. Section 4 discusses the corpus-based findings. This section is divided into three subsections: 4.1 shows the frequency of these constructions, 4.2 examines their discourse-pragmatic functions, and 4.3 offers a brief register comparison on spoken academic discourse and colloquial face-to-face conversation. Finally, Section 5 presents some concluding remarks.

2. The discourse-pragmatic functions of *if/si*-constructions

As discussed in Section 1, prototypical conditional constructions respond to a cause-consequence pattern. However, previous research has shown that these constructions can fulfil a wide range of discourse-pragmatic functions. Indeed, as Traugott, ter Meulen, Reilly, and Ferguson (1986, p. 1) note, “some sentences with the formal markers of conditionality are semantically and pragmatically only marginally conditional or not conditional at all”.

With respect to English, Quirk et al. (1985, p. 1088-1089) establish an important first distinction between *direct* and *indirect conditions*. Whereas the first type includes prototypical cause-consequence patterns, as in (1) and (2) above, the latter includes cases related to the “implicit speech act of the utterance” (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1089), rather than to the propositional content of the matrix clause. In Spanish, similar distinctions are also found in grammars. The grammar of the RAE-ASALE (2009, p. 3550-3551) considers two types of conditionals: *condicionales del enunciado* and *condicionales de la enunciación*, which would be equivalent to the direct and indirect types distinguished by Quirk et al. (1985). Likewise, Montolío Durán (1999a, p. 3683-3690) regards the indirect type as a “peripheral” use of the conditional construction, used to convey politeness, to make metalinguistic comments or to express relevance.

Functional-cognitive models of conditionality have also shown distinctions between content conditionals, epistemic conditionals and speech act conditionals (Sweetser, 1990; Dancygier and Sweetser, 2000, 2005). Content conditionals correspond to prototypical patterns of conditionality in which the protasis indicates a cause and the apodosis its consequence or effect. Epistemic conditionals, in turn, are those related to the verbalization of a process of reasoning on the part of the speaker; they can be paraphrased by “If I know [protasis], then I conclude [apodosis]” (Sweetser, 1990, p. 121). An example of an epistemic conditional is presented in (5), in which the speaker infers that John went to the party to make Miriam angry. Finally, speech act conditionals can be paraphrased as “If [protasis], then let us consider that I perform this speech act (i.e., the one represented as the apodosis)” (Sweetser 1990, p. 121), as shown in example (6).

(5) If John went to that party, (then) he was trying to infuriate Miriam. (Sweetser, 1990, p. 116)

(6) If I may say so, that’s a crazy idea. (Sweetser, 1990, p. 118)

In addition to the cases of conditional constructions introduced by *if* and *si* already discussed, constructions introduced by the same conjunctions can also be used as instances of insubordination. Evans (2007, p. 367), who coined the term *insubordination*, defines this phenomenon as “the conventionalized main clause use of what, on prima

facie grounds, appear to be formally subordinate clauses” (italics in the original). In other words, utterances that contain formal markers of subordination, such as the subordinating conjunctions *if* and *si*, also appear in cases in which the *if/si*-clause stands alone, without the presence of any accompanying matrix clause, as illustrated in (7) and (8). In these cases, the *if/si*-clause is reanalysed as a main clause itself. Evans (2007) argues that these constructions have conventionalized their functions and, despite appearing as stand-alone clauses, their meanings are fully complete in the discourse situations. For instance, example (7) encodes a request by means of an in subordinate *if*-construction and (8) illustrates a wish on the part of the speaker. In general, Van linden and Van de Velde (2014, p. 226) argue that in subordinate constructions convey “interpersonal meaning”. In the Spanish literature, these constructions are often examined under the labels of *condicional suspendida* (suspended conditional) or *prótasis suspendida* (suspended protasis) (RAE-ASALE, 2009, p. 3547, 3549) or *realización independiente con si* (independent realization with *si*) (Montolío Durán, 1999a, p. 3681).³

(7) If you could give me a couple of 39c stamps please. (Evans, 2007, p. 380)

(8) ¡Si acabara la tesis este verano! (Gras, 2011, p. 292)
‘If I could finish the dissertation this summer!’

While cases of *if/si*-conditional constructions and instances of in subordination introduced by the same markers have generally been studied independently, we propose here a categorization that encompasses both types of constructions. For such purposes, the theoretical framework adopted is based on three metafunctions distinguished in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014), allowing us to categorize *if/si*-constructions at the ideational, interpersonal and textual levels. Ideational *if/si*-constructions include prototypical cases of conditional constructions, that is, those which display a cause-consequence pattern. Interpersonal *if/si*-constructions, in turn, put the emphasis on the interaction between the discourse participants. A broad conception of interpersonal *if/si*-constructions would encompass the epistemic and speech act subtypes distinguished by Sweetser (1990) and by Dancygier and Sweetser (2000, 2005), as well as instances of in subordination introduced by *if* and *si*, given that in subordinate constructions “all share the semantic property of expressing interpersonal meaning” (Van linden and Van de Velde, 2014, p. 226). Finally, textual *if/si*-constructions are those which explicitly signal cohesion in discourse. As Carter-Thomas (2007, p. 158) argues, conditionals “serve to instruct or guide the readers in following the development of the text”, fulfilling thus a textual function.

The adoption of this model –also applied in Lastres-López (2021) – will thus allow us to explore the interpersonal and textual nature of *if/si*-constructions in spoken academic English and Spanish, in addition to their prototypical ideational function. Prior studies have addressed the relevance of the interpersonal and the textual metafunctions for the constructions under analysis in this paper. In particular, Warchal (2010), who examines written academic discourse, emphasizes how research articles build interpersonal relations between the writer and the reader through conditional clauses. In the same vein, with respect to the textual metafunction, Biber, Conrad and Cortés (2004, p. 371),

³ For comprehensive analyses of these constructions in Spanish, see Schwenter (1996, 1999, 2016a, 2016b), Montolío Durán (1999b), Gras (2011) and Pérez Béjar (2018, 2019, 2022).

state that conditionals are among the various constructions which can be used as “discourse organizing bundles” in academic discourse. Hence, the interest in studying *if/si*-constructions from a broader perspective –including within the same framework of analysis cases of subordination, namely, conditional constructions, together with instances of insubordination – and providing a classification which can encompass the various functions that these constructions may fulfil in discourse.

3. Corpora and methodology

In corpus-based contrastive linguistics, one of the most important concerns to be addressed is the use of comparable corpora. These are corpora which contain original texts in two or more languages and are compiled using the same sampling frame (Johansson, 1998; McEnery and Wilson, 2001; Hunston, 2002). As, to date, there is no contrastive corpus of spoken discourse that samples English and Spanish in the register under analysis, we have resorted to the spoken academic components of similar reference corpora in both languages. For English, we employ the British component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB) (Nelson et al., 2002), extracting data from the classroom lessons component of the corpus (texts “S1B-001” to “S1B-020”). For Spanish, we use the Spanish component of the *Integrated Reference Corpora for Spoken Romance Languages* (C-ORAL-ROM) (Cresti and Moneglia, 2005), selecting the texts that also contain academic discourse. In particular, these are labelled in this corpus as “classroom lessons” (texts “enatte01” to “enatte04”) and “conferences” (texts “enatco01” to “enatco04”). Despite the different labelling, their contents are very similar, and no differences have been found with respect to the use of *si*-constructions.

Regarding the size of the corpora, the number of texts in the English corpus is 20, totalling 42,210 words. In contrast, the Spanish dataset is composed of 8 texts, which amount to 24,628 words. Given the different size of the corpora analysed, normalized frequencies per ten thousand words will be provided, so that the quantitative results are comparable.

The process of data extraction from the corpora was carried out searching for *if* and *si* respectively in the respective interfaces of the corpora, ICECUP, for ICE-GB, and CONTEXTES, for C-ORAL-ROM. The automatic extraction rendered a total of 206 tokens in English and 69 tokens in Spanish. A manual analysis of the data was then carried out to exclude cases which did not correspond to conditional or insubordinate uses of *if* and *si*. Once excluded, we annotated the data according to two variables: (i) their grammatical status, that is, conditional constructions or insubordinate constructions; and (ii) their metafunction, that is, ideational, interpersonal or textual.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Frequency

As mentioned in Section 3, the 206 tokens retrieved from the English corpus and the 69 tokens extracted from the Spanish corpus were manually analysed to discard cases that did not correspond to conditional or insubordinate constructions. Table 1 presents the

absolute frequency and the normalized frequency per ten thousand words of the tokens obtained from the corpora in both languages.

Table 1. *Frequency in English and Spanish*

Type	English		Spanish	
	<i>N</i>	<i>pttw</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>pttw</i>
Conditional constructions	137	32.46	48	19.49
Insubordinate clauses	3	0.71	1	0.41
Complement clauses	11	2.61	12	4.87
Comparative clauses (<i>as if, like if, como si</i>)	13	3.08	4	1.62
Concessive clauses (<i>even if</i>)	2	0.47	0	0
Repetitions, false starts, interruptions, etc.	40	9.48	4	1.62

Among the cases discarded, both languages presented instances of complement clauses introduced by *if* and *si*, as illustrated in examples (9) and (10).

(9) So I don't know if uh many of you came across this but there's a very nice story in Tarbull's autobiography <, > (ICE-GB:S1B-005 #173:1:A)

(10) O sea que lo que puede interesar a un sociolingüista es si hay una diferencia en la forma de hablar (C-ORAL-ROM, enatco04)
'That is, what can interest a sociolinguist is if there is a difference in the way of speaking'

Cases of complex subordinators were also found in the samples examined and discarded for further analysis. On the one hand, this includes clauses introduced by *as if* and *like if* in English and their Spanish equivalent *como si*, indicating a comparison, as in (11) and (12). On the other hand, instances of concessive clauses –introduced by *even if*– were only found in the English corpus, probably as a result of the reduced size of the sample analysed in Spanish. An illustration of an *even if*-clause is presented in (13).

(11) Uh it was almost as if uhm she had tried to learn a second language and she was always very halting in her use of language (ICE-GB:S1B-003 #106:1:B)

(12) Creía como si fuera un individuo más de la familia (C-ORAL-ROM enatco01)
'He was growing as if he were another member of the family'

(13) So even if we try to say that the constitution is that body of rules, we discover that it's not just rules (ICE-GB:S1B-011 #142:1:A)

Finally, both corpora presented cases of typical speech phenomena such as repetitions, false starts and interruptions, as illustrated in (14) and (15); these were also discarded for further analysis.

(14) I mean <,,> if if it was present <unclear-words> (ICE-GB:S1B-009 #209:1:D)

(15) También podríamos decir si cada día uno escribe sus propios [///] (C-ORAL-ROM, enatco03)

‘We could also say if every day one writes their own’

Quantitatively, as expected, conditional constructions represent the large majority of the cases in both languages. However, it is worth noting a contrastive difference associated with the frequency of conditionals in English and Spanish. English conditionals present a higher normalized frequency (32.46) than their Spanish counterparts (19.49), a finding which indicates that full conditional constructions seem to be more frequently employed in English spoken academic discourse than in the same register in Spanish.

With respect to in subordinate clauses, the results show very low frequencies in both languages. This goes in line with corpus findings from prior studies in other registers, which indicates that conditional in subordination represents low proportions as compared to conditional constructions (Lastres-López, 2021). Interestingly, however, instances of in subordination were found in both corpora. Both *if/si*-conditional constructions and *if/si*-in subordinate clauses will be discussed in full in Section 4.2.

4.2. Discourse-pragmatic function

As already mentioned, both conditionals and in subordinate constructions were manually annotated according to their discourse-pragmatic function. For this purpose, as discussed in Section 3, we classified the tokens according to the three metafunctions considered in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014), distinguishing thus three types of *if/si*-clauses: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Table 2 presents the distribution of ideational, interpersonal and textual *if/si*-constructions in English and Spanish, including absolute frequencies, percentages with respect to the total number of conditionals and in subordinate constructions in each language, and normalized frequencies per ten thousand words.

Table 2. *Distribution of ideational, interpersonal and textual if/si-constructions in English and Spanish.*

Type	English			Spanish		
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>pttw</i>	<i>N</i>	%	<i>pttw</i>
Ideational	112	80.00	26.53	33	67.35	13.40
Interpersonal	27	19.29	6.40	16	32.65	6.50
Textual	1	0.71	0.24	0	0	0
Total	140	100	-	49	100	-

As shown in Table 2 above, ideational *if/si*-constructions are the most frequent construction in both languages, amounting to 80% of the cases in English and to 67.35% in Spanish. With respect to their normalized frequencies, the ideational metafunction is twice more frequent in English (26.53) than in Spanish (13.40), showing that, in spoken academic discourse, English resorts more to these constructions. Ideational conditionals are revealed as important mechanisms in academic discourse to provide explanations,

since they allow the speaker to establish the cause of an event in the protasis of the conditional and express its consequence or effect in the apodosis. Illustrations are provided in examples (16) and (17). In (16) the lecturer in a geology class discusses the consequence of dividing the stratigraphic column, whereas in (17) the lecturer in a linguistics class mentions the possible effect of providing a child with a building game.

(16) If you were to divide up the stratigraphic column today you would get four main divisions (ICE-GB:S1B-006 #286:1:A)

(17) Si se ofrece a un niño piezas de un juego de construcción, es posible que haga lo que hacían los niños del ejemplo de Vigotsky, hacer construcciones (C-ORAL-ROM, enatco03)

‘If a child is offered pieces of a building game, it’s possible that he does what the children from the example of Vigotsky did, make constructions’

Interpersonal *if/si*-constructions are second in frequency in both languages. These include 24 conditionals and 3 instances of insubordination in English, and 15 conditionals plus an insubordinate clause in Spanish. In total, interpersonal *if/si*-constructions represent 19.29% of the total of cases of *if* in English, whereas the proportion is higher in Spanish, amounting to 32.65%. Despite these differences with respect to the total number of *if/si*-tokens, the normalized frequencies show that these constructions are similarly frequent in English and Spanish, with frequencies per ten thousand words of 6.40 and 6.50 respectively. Therefore, both languages seem to express interpersonality through conditionals in very similar rates in spoken academic discourse. Interpersonal conditionals are illustrated in examples (18) and (19). They allow the speaker to engage with the audience, a function that Hyland (2005) argues is typical of academic discourse. This engagement is carried out by means of “negotiating meanings and standpoints rather than merely providing information” (Warchal, 2010, p. 141), as would be the case with ideational conditionals. This interpersonal function is thus also related to mitigation (Caffi, 2007, p. 65, 67; Chodorowska-Pilch, 2017), since the content is presented as less assertive by means of *if you like* in (18) and *si se quiere* in (19), respectively.

(18) So if you like that is the definitive statement for the time being (ICE-GB:S1B-007 #205:1:A)

(19) Una parte de esta actividad que es propiamente cognitiva y si se quiere dirigida a la resolución de problemas (C-ORAL-ROM, entaco03)

‘One part of this activity which is specifically cognitive and if you like oriented to the resolution of problems’

As discussed above, most of the interpersonal cases belong to conditional constructions. However, and despite the relatively small data sample analysed, instances of insubordination are present in both languages, amounting to three tokens in English and only one in Spanish. Examples of *if*-insubordination and *si*-insubordination are shown in (20) and (21) respectively. Even though these are constructions in which the protasis stands alone, without any accompanying apodosis, they are not considered as cases of incomplete sentences (Evans, 2007), since their meaning is fully complete in the

discourse situation. Although previous research has shown that *if*-insubordination may fulfil a wide range of functions in discourse (Stirling, 1999; Kaltenböck, 2016; Mato-Míguez, 2016; D’Hertefelt, 2018; Lastres-López, 2018), all the cases found both in the English and Spanish corpus of academic discourse are requests. Note, however, that these quantitative results are preliminary and require confirmation by further research with larger data samples. The English insubordinate clause presented in example (20) functions as a request to the audience so that the speaker can continue his lecture. Similarly, in the Spanish example in (21), the speaker employs an insubordinate clause to ask his interlocutor to show the next slide, instead of employing, among other possibilities, *por favor* (*please*) plus a verb in the imperative mode. These are cases in which *if/si*-insubordinate clauses are used, as it happens with interpersonal conditionals, for purposes of mitigation (Caffi, 2007, p. 65, 67; Chodorowska-Pilch, 2017), thus encoding the information in a more hedged way.

(20) If I can continue <,,> <laughter> (ICE-GB:S1B-008 #124:2:A)

(21) Si me pones la siguiente diapositiva (C-ORAL-ROM, enatco01)
‘If you can put the next slide for me’

Finally, textual *if/si*-constructions are practically absent. Only one example was found in the English sample, shown in (22), in which the speaker is discussing different types of plants in a factory. In contrast, no textual *si*-constructions were attested in the Spanish sample. This result is, to a certain extent, unexpected if we consider that academic discourse tends to signal cohesion explicitly. Although a possible explanation could be the reduced size of the sample analysed, another factor to consider is whether cohesion is achieved by other connecting or linking mechanisms. This is something that goes beyond the scope of this paper but that would be worth examining in further research.

(22) If you go towards a more automated plant, I think the nature of the skills that the people will have will be different (ICE-GB:S1B-020 #179:1:A).

4.3. A brief comparison of conditional constructions in spoken academic discourse and colloquial face-to-face conversation

This section provides a brief comparison between the results obtained from our corpus-based analysis of spoken academic discourse and previous findings reported in Lastres-López (2021) on colloquial face-to-face conversation. Lastres-López (2021) examines the face-to-face conversation components of the *International Corpus of English* and the Spanish subcorpus of the *Integrated Reference Corpora for Spoken Romance Languages*. These are components of the same corpora analysed here for spoken academic discourse, hence the comparability of our results. The aim is to determine whether *if/si*-constructions display the same discourse-pragmatic functions in both of the registers studied.

As mentioned above, corpus findings from large conversation samples in English and Spanish indicate that ideational and interpersonal conditionals occur in very similar proportions, with interpersonal conditionals slightly outnumbering their ideational counterparts. This is a finding which contrasts sharply with the scenario presented here

for spoken academic discourse, in which conditionals are primarily used in their ideational function to express a cause and its consequence or effect. Therefore, we observe an important frequency difference with respect to the discourse-pragmatic functions of conditionals in the two registers examined. While the ideational function of conditionals seems to be more relevant in academic discourse, in colloquial conversation speakers tend to employ conditionals more frequently to express interpersonal functions.

Regarding insubordination introduced by *if* and *si*, these constructions also occur in similarly low proportions in conversation. While in subordinate *if/si*-clauses were employed as requests in spoken academic discourse, their functions in conversation are much more varied, including both directives (requests, suggestions, offers, threats, and permission) and non-directives (wishes, assertions/exclamations, and complaints). Given the reduced number of cases of insubordination attested in our sample of spoken academic discourse, we cannot establish whether *if/si*-insubordination has narrowed down to certain specific functions in academic discourse, namely, to requests only, or whether this is merely a consequence of the size of the corpora analysed.

Based on the comparison between spoken academic discourse and face-to-face conversation, we can conclude that academic discourse tends to employ conditionals for their prototypical cause-consequence function more frequently than for their interpersonal function. The latter function, which is broadly concerned with establishing relations between speakers and addressees, plays a major role in colloquial face-to-face conversations. This shows that both registers –spoken academic discourse and colloquial face-to-face conversations– differ in the uses and functions of conditionals in both languages.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper has offered a brief contrastive analysis of *if/si*-constructions employed in spoken academic discourse in English and Spanish. Although the corpora analysed are relatively small, they provide interesting preliminary results that can be expanded by further research based on larger datasets.

First, as expected, the majority of *if/si*-constructions in academic discourse correspond to conditionals in both languages. However, English employs these constructions more frequently than Spanish in the register studied here. Another relevant finding is that, despite insubordination being a low-frequency phenomenon, in subordinate *if/si*-constructions to express requests are also present in both language samples of spoken academic discourse.

Second, with respect to the discourse-pragmatic functions of *if/si*-constructions in spoken academic discourse, the majority of them are used as ideational constructions to express cause-consequence patterns in discourse, corroborating the importance of such function in academic discourse. In particular, English speakers employ these constructions more than Spanish speakers do in this type of discourse. Interpersonal constructions, on the other hand, are less frequent, as opposed to their ideational counterparts, but they are similarly frequent in both English and Spanish. This type of *if/si*-construction is used as a consensus-building strategy that allows the speaker to negotiate meanings and concepts with the audience and to mitigate the illocutionary

force of the utterances. Lastly, textual *if/si*-constructions were practically absent from the samples analysed. This suggests that textual cohesion is achieved by means of other mechanisms in spoken academic discourse. This is something which could be worth exploring in further research.

Third, if we compare spoken academic discourse and colloquial face-to-face conversation, we observe sharp differences with respect to the discourse-pragmatic functions of conditionals. While conditionals in both languages are used in spoken academic discourse more frequently in their ideational function –to convey causes and their consequences, as opposed to expressing interpersonality or textuality– the same constructions, in contrast, show equally similar frequencies in their ideational and interpersonal functions in conversation, even with interpersonal conditionals slightly outnumbering their ideational counterparts.

Finally, further research is needed to examine *if/si*-constructions in larger corpora of academic discourse to corroborate the preliminary results presented in this paper. Given that our findings suggest sharp differences with respect to the discourse-pragmatic functions of *if/si*-constructions in spoken academic discourse and colloquial face-to-face conversation, future research should study these constructions across a wider range of spoken and written registers.

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