

## SYNTAX AND PRAGMATICS OF SPANISH PROPHRASES *SI* AND *NO*

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**Abstract.** Among the multiple analyses proposed for the Spanish yes / no words *sí* and *no*, the models that consider them as prophrases seem to be the most adequate ones, since they allow capturing their syntactic and pragmatic properties. Nevertheless, little effort has been devoted to clarifying the nature of the phrase it can form. For doing so, this work compares prophrases with other syntactic units that can appear as utterances, such as fragments, verbal clauses and verbless clauses. The result of this contrast indicates that prophrases share some properties with these three types but they have distinct properties of their own and should, therefore, be included as a fourth kind of syntactic structure able to form a full utterance.

**Key words:** verbless clauses, verbless utterances, ellipsis, polar adverbs, prophrases, syntax of dialogue, oral Spanish, *sí*, *no*

### INTRODUCTION

Syntax has traditionally focused on written language; as a result, studies dealing with phenomena that are more frequent in oral speech than in written records are relatively recent and not numerous. One of those phenomena that has received little attention is the status of words *sí* 'yes' and *no* 'no', which have long been considered as particular units with no relationship with other units of the language. Their part of speech and the structures they form are still a matter of discussion, and the existing corpus studies about the subject have focused more on the pragmatic effects than on their syntactic properties (Wiertlewski, 1994 for Polish; Westera, 2014 for English). A few works deal with the diversity of speech acts that they can perform, (e.g. Ginzburg, 2012) but none, to our knowledge, details the interaction between syntax and pragmatics.

In this way, the hypothesis presented in this paper states that the words *sí* and *no* are not merely parts of speech, but they also constitute the head of verbless clauses and should, therefore, be studied in the frame of other syntactic structures such as fragments and predicative verbless clauses. In order to confirm this hypothesis, we have firstly extracted all cases of *sí* and *no* from the corpus of Contemporary Spanish CORLEC and classified them by their syntactic structure.

Secondly, we have observed the speech act they perform in relationship with their preceding context. Finally, we have compared their syntactic variety, their ability to perform a determined speech act and their frequency with the properties of two other kinds of syntactic structures: firstly, with fragments, which are clauses with an elliptic verbal head, and secondly, with predicative verbless clauses, which are clauses without a verb or an ellipsis, but with a predicative head realized by a noun, an adjective, an adverb or a preposition.

This analysis of the status and structure of *sí* and *no* in Spanish will be structured as follows: firstly, it will present previous accounts of these words in Spanish as well as in other Romance languages such as French that deal with their part of speech and the structure they form. Secondly, it will present a comparison of prophrases with other kinds of verbless utterances, which will allow contextualizing them in a larger set of units in the language. Thirdly, it will present its diversity of syntactic structures, as it is shown by the 641 examples of *sí* and *no* forming phrastic structures extracted from the corpus CORLEC. Fourthly, it will focus on the speech act performed by these units, as found in the aforementioned corpus. Fifthly, it will pay attention to the ability of coordination and coordination of prophrases, and their frequency in the corpus. This will allow comparing the frequency of subordination of prophrases with other verbless utterances. Finally, it will present the conclusions that can be drawn from the analyses of the variety of corpus data.

We have chosen the reference corpus CORLEC for this study, as it is representative of the contemporary oral Spanish spoken in the 1990s in the city of Madrid (Marcos Marin, 1992). This corpus, freely available online, is composed of 1 078 780 words, distributed in 63 291 utterances, combining clauses with or without verbs and interjections. The corpus comprises 17 genres, which we have classified into monologic genres (religion, instructions, documentary, university, science, law, politics, technique, TV news) and dialogic genres (administration, sport, publicity, debates, high school, games, interviews, informal conversations). In this way, its size and diversity of registers and contexts ensure a high degree of representation.

## PREVIOUS ACCOUNT OF *SÍ* AND *NO*

The first topic to be addressed is the part of speech of these units. *Sí* and *no* have traditionally been considered as adverbs, as it is presented in the *Diccionario de Lengua Española* by the *Real Academia Española*. Some authors provide a more precise term, such as ‘adverbial particle’, which stresses their syntactic independence, or ‘polar adverbs’, which points to their ability to provide positive or negative polarity to sentence content, as studied by Progovac (1994).

Differently, for French equivalent units *oui* and *no*, which seem to behave like Spanish *sí* and *no*, Kline (1977) notes that these units have a particular use as an attention-seeking or attention-keeping device, and, in consequence, he considers them as interjections. The importance of Kline’s (1977) account resides in his

observation of the particular illocutive properties of these units that are able to express more than plain acceptance and refusal.

A proposal that has received more attention is the one that considers *sí* and *no* as pro-forms. Proforms constitute a part of speech similar to pronouns, with the particularity that they are not necessarily anaphoric to nouns, but to phrases or to a whole clause. The idea that these units are pro-forms allows us to stress two of their properties: the fact that they are not adjuncts like adverbs and their ability of being anaphoric to a phrastic content (Rubbatel, 1982; Danjou-Flaux, 1984).

The second question at stake is the composition of the syntactic structure formed by these units. If they are anaphoric to a clausal content, we must assume that they express the same clausal content, while accepting the evidence that they neither have the same selectional properties nor valency as the predicates that constitute the head of clauses.

On the other hand, the idea that *sí* and *no* form some kind of phrastic unit is stressed in a number of concepts in the literature, for example ‘minor sentence’ (Kline, 1977), sentence word or one-word sentence (Hoff, 2009). In this way, these syntactic units constitute independent structures that are anaphoric to a whole phrastic content (see Beyssade and Marandin, 2006 for the concept of ‘phrastic content’), but differently from clauses, they are not independent in discourse, since they need to rely on previous context in order to be produced and interpreted. This property of not being autonomous in discourse, observed for English by Fernandez and Ginzburg (2002), is also seen in Spanish *sí* and *no*, and this has led some authors to consider them as non-sentential utterances (Fernandez, 2006).

Interestingly, the term of non-sentential utterance (Fernandez and Ginzburg, 2002; Fernandez, 2006) puts together different kinds of utterances that are not autonomous in discourse, regardless their syntactic nature: it contains prophrases, which are not elliptic but anaphoric content (Rubbatel, 1982; Danjou-Flaux, 1984), and elliptic clauses. Nevertheless, prophrases and elliptic clauses, also called ‘fragments’ (Bilbiie, 2011), share some of their properties, especially regarding the speech acts they perform, as it will be shown later.

Besides, Spanish *sí* and *no* show, like other Romance languages, some differences from their English counterparts. Firstly, in Romance languages, unlike English, prophrase heads can be preceded by a noun phrase, which provides the informational topic (1). As it can be seen in the translation of (1), in these cases, English would use auxiliary verbs and would overtly express the subject. Secondly, unlike English, Romance languages can embed prophrases, like in (2) (Culicover, 2013: 233). An asterisk preceding a sentence (\*) indicates an ungrammatical structure.

- |     |                        |   |
|-----|------------------------|---|
| (1) | A: -¿Venís? B: -Yo no. | A: -‘Are you coming?’ B: -‘I don’t.’                |
| (2) | a. Creo que sí.        | ‘I think so.’ / ‘*I think that yes.’                |
|     | b. Creo que Mary no.   | ‘I think Mary doesn’t.’ / ‘*I think that Mary not.’ |
|     | c. Si no, dime.        | ‘Otherwise, tell me.’ / ‘*If not, tell me.’         |

Regarding the pragmatic analysis of *sí* and *no*, works like Wiertlewski (1994) and Westera (1994) have analysed their felicity conditions and the implicatures they can trigger. The work of Heidari and Afghari (2012) deals with some of the speech acts that can be performed by prophrases, like confirmation check, but this work and others (e.g. Fernandez and Ginzburg, 2002) do not make a distinction between the syntactic form of these units and the speech act they can perform. Undoubtedly, Fernandez and Ginzburg (2002) offer a rich account of the speech acts that prophrases can perform. But the types they propose do not constitute syntactic units, but present some compounds of two units, as it will be seen later on in example (7). For instance, their plain affirmative answer *Very loud, yes* and their plain rejection *No, Mrs. Billy* are better analysed as utterances containing two syntactic structures: one containing the preform and the other one formed by a fragment, as shown in Garcia-Marchena (2015).

### CORPUS ANALYSIS: DIVERSITY AND CONTRAST WITH OTHER CLAUSAL STRUCTURES

The Spanish corpus CORLEC offers a large number of occurrences of prophrases and a wide variety of structures: they can be composed by the head only (3), and they can also be accompanied by a periphrastic (a dislocated phrase) on the left (4) or by an adjunct (5). The prophrase *sí*, unlike its counterpart *no*, can have a clausal complement (6). Dislocated phrases are nevertheless restricted to the left periphery (4). In contrast, phrases placed on the right of the head do not belong to the structure of the prophrase, but they constitute independent structures, as it can be seen in (7). This can also be noticed by isolating the semantic content of each unit.

In this way, the content of *no* would correspond to ‘I will not come’, whereas the content of *mañana* ‘tomorrow’ can be paraphrased as ‘I will come tomorrow’. Besides, both units perform different speech acts: the first one is an answer or refusal, whereas the second one constitutes an act of precision. In spite of this evidence, some authors classify the combinations of prophrase plus phrase as a single non-sentential unit (Fernandez, 2006).

Prophrases can also perform different speech acts, such as agreement or disagreement (3, 4), acknowledgement (8) or confirmation question (9).

- |     |  |  |
|-----|--|--|
| (3) | A: -Vienes a casa? B: -Sí.                         | A: -‘Are you coming home?’ B: -‘Yes.’                    |
| (4) | A: -¿Venís? B: -Yo no.                             | A: -‘Are you coming?’ B: -‘I don’t’                      |
| (5) | A: -¿Vamos juntos?<br>A: -‘Are we going together?’ | B: -Si quieres, sí.<br>B: -‘If you want, yes (we will).’ |
| (6) | -Yo sí que voy.                                    | -‘I am going indeed’ (lit.: ‘I yes that I go.’)          |
| (7) | A: -¿Vienes hoy?<br>A: -‘Will you come today?’     | B: -No, mañana.<br>B: -‘No; tomorrow.’                   |
| (8) | A: -Se fueron a casa. B: -Sí.                      | A: -‘Did they go home?’ B: -‘Yes.’                       |
| (9) | A: Se fueron a casa. B: -¿Sí?                      | A: -‘They went home.’ B: -‘Yes?’                         |

The examples provided in the preceding section show several word groups in a single utterance containing the prophrase, which suggests that prophrases are not constructed in isolation, but they form some kind of phrastic structure. We find different possible cases: they can stand alone (3, 8, 9), or have a periphrastic (4), or an adjunct (5) or even a complement (6). Therefore, they constitute a kind of syntactic unit expressing a complete clausal content (a predication) while having a different composition from verbal clauses.

Among the structures that express a predicative clausal content, we find, firstly, verbal clauses, which express a predication (10) or the existence of an asserted entity. Secondly, there are verbless clauses with no ellipsis and a non-verbal head, like (11) (Abeillé and Delaveau, 2016, for French), and thirdly, fragments (12), which are clauses with an elliptic verbal head (Bilbiie, 2011).

Prophrases share some properties with these types: they have their own syntactic structure, they express a predicative clause content, and they realise a speech act. Nevertheless, they also display some differences: verbal clauses have a verbal head, while verbless clauses have a verbless predicative head (an adjective, a noun, an adverb, or a preposition), and fragments have an elliptical verbal head, while prophrase structures are headed by the prophrases *sí* or *no*. As the particularity of the clauses formed by pro-clauses is the addition of polarity, we will call them ‘polar verbless clauses’.

- |      |  |   |
|------|--|---|
| (10) | Tu casa es preciosa.                                       | ‘Your house is very beautiful.’         |
| (11) | ¡Qué bonita tu casa!                                       | ‘So beautiful your house!’              |
| (12) | A: -¿A qué hora vienes?<br>A: -‘What time are you coming?’ | B: -A las tres.<br>B: -‘Three o’clock.’ |

If we focus on the structures formed by prophrases, we notice that they share some properties with both verbless clauses and fragments, while differing in others; on the one hand, syntactically, they share the property of being structures with a syntactic (non-verbal) head with verbal and verbless clauses. On the other hand, semantically, their content is not expressed by the mere meaning of their parts, but it is recovered from a previous utterance. In this way, polar clauses share this property with fragments.

We can also compare polar verbless clauses, headed by prophrases, with the different kinds of verbless clauses: firstly, existential verbless clauses (13), which are constituted by a SN with an existential interpretation; secondly, with modal verbless clauses, where a predicate expresses either an epistemic (14) or a deontic (evaluative) content (15); and thirdly, with illocutive verbless clauses, which perform a direct speech act, such as example (16), which constitutes a directive act. They have a property in common: both structures lack a verbal predicate, but they are also distinguished by an essential feature: predicative verbless clauses, unlike polar verbless clauses, are autonomous in discourse. The meaning they convey corresponds to the combination of their parts, whereas polar verbless clauses recover their content thanks to their anaphoric properties.

- (13) ¡Un *Rolls* de los setenta!                    ‘A Roll Royce from the 70s!’  
 (14) Seguro que Enrique no viene al concierto.  
       ‘Sure Enrique won’t come to the concert.’  
 (15) Menos mal que has venido.                ‘Happily (that) you came.’  
 (16) ¡Manos arriba!                                ‘Hands up!’

Polar verbless clauses can be also contrasted with fragments, which can be divided into two types, depending on whether they contain an element that is contrasted with an element in the preceding utterance or not. This element is called the ‘correlate’, and it allows us to classify fragments in two kinds: with a correlate (17) and without it (18). The concept of correlate has been proposed by Bilbiie (2018) and refers to the contrasted elements found in both the fragment and its source. The source is defined by the utterance from which it takes the part of its content that is left unexpressed by the items present in the fragment (Bilbiie 2018). In this way, B’s answer in example (17) is in contrast with its correlate *qué día* ‘which day’, because it constitutes the content that instantiates the variable set by the interrogative word phrase *que día* ‘what day’. For more information about the semantics of interrogatives see Ginzburg and Sag (2000).

- (17) A: -¿Qué día te vas?                                B: -Seguramente elmiércoles. (CON014A)  
       A: -‘Which day are you leaving?’        B: -‘Probably on Wednesday.’  
 (18) A: -¿Y nos llama, Concepción...?        B: -Desde Águilas, de Murcia. (ENT 012B)  
       A: -‘So you are calling, Conception...?’        B: -‘From Aguilas, in Murcia.’

## ANALYSIS: STRUCTURE AND SPEECH ACTS PERFORMED BY PROPHRASES

Having presented the typology of verbless clauses and fragments, and their relationship with polar verbless clauses, we will consider now the properties of the latter in order to discern whether they align with the one or the other in their syntactic and pragmatic behaviour.

The properties of polar utterances can be summarized as follows:

1. Polar utterances are not autonomous in discourse
2. Their speech act depends on their relationship with the source
3. They display a diversity of syntactic structures
4. The prophrase must comply with some selectional properties
5. They have a fixed information structure
6. They can appear in tag questions

Firstly, polar utterances, unlike verbless clauses (11, 14, 15, 16), cannot be uttered without previous content, but they require a source instead. In this respect, polar utterances are similar to fragments, as it can be seen in the contrast between (19) and (20).

- (19) A: -¿Sigues trabajando en la empresa?      B: -Sí. (ADM 004A)  
 A: -‘Do you still work in the firm?’      B: -‘Yes.’
- (20) A: -¿Te parece que hablemos de las brujas?      B: -¿Las brujas? (CON 024B)  
 A: -‘What do you think if we talk about witches?’      B: -‘Witches?’

Secondly, as it has been shown above, polar utterances can perform a number of speech acts. This speech act can, nevertheless, be anticipated because it depends on the relationship between the source utterance and the polar utterance. In this way, if the source of a polar utterance is a question (or a query for information), the polar utterance is then an answer; if it is a proposal, the polar utterance will be an acceptance or refusal (5). Similarly, the speech act will also depend on the syntactic and semantic properties of the source and polar utterance. In this way, a questioning polar utterance having an assertive source will constitute a demand for confirmation (9). Finally, the difference between acceptance and refusal is given by the polarity of the prophrase, which points to the same referent of the source (positive polarity) or a different one (negative polarity).

These properties of polar utterances are also found in fragments with a correlate. As it can be seen in the answers in examples (20-23), the answer of (21) constitutes an agreement, whereas (22) is an acknowledgement. Also, B’s intervention in (23) performs a clarifying question, while the speech act to B’s answer in (24) can be identified as a correction.

Like in polar utterances, the speech act of fragments with a correlate depends on the syntactic and semantic properties of the utterance and its source. As detailed by García-Marchena (2019), the speech act performed can be deduced from the interaction of the correlate in the fragment and the correlate in its source, that is, the segment of the preceding utterance which contrasts with the fragment.

In this way, in (21), the act of acceptance is the result of the following contrast: the fragment is identical to its correlate, and its assertive value contrasts with the questioning value of the source. In (22), the act of acknowledgement comes from having the same assertive value and the same referent in the fragment and its correlate. In (23), the identity of referent and the questioning value in both result in a clarifying question. Finally, in (24), the same assertive value in both the fragment and its source and the lack of identity of referent constitutes a correction.

- (21) A: -¿Se fue con María?      B: -Con María.  
 A: -‘Did he go with Maria?’      B: -‘With Maria.’
- (22) A: -Se fue con María.      B: -¿Con María!  
 A: -‘He went with Maria.’      B: -‘With Maria!’
- (23) A: -¿Se fue con María?      B: -¿Con María?  
 A: -Did he go with Maria?’      B: -‘With Maria?’

- (24) A: -Se fue con María.                      B: -Con Pedro.  
 A: -‘He went with Maria.’                      B: -‘With Pedro.’

Thirdly, as it has been pointed out previously, polar utterances have a diversity of syntactic structures with a head. This is different from fragments which lack the head of the main predicate, since they are remnants of ellipsis but similar to verbless clauses, where we find the same diversity: head only, with adjuncts or peripherics, or even complements.

Fourthly, prophrases can select arguments and have adjuncts. As such, they can impose some restrictions in the complements they select. This contrasts with fragments, which do not impose any selectional restriction on its constituents, since the phrases that compose the fragment are selected by an elliptic predicate.

Fifthly, polar utterances display a recurrent information structure composed by the dichotomy topic – comment, as it can be seen in (25). This information structure is also found in verbless clauses, like (26). Similarly, we can notice that the prophrase constitutes the focus of the comment and that the background can be expressed as a complement (27) in polar utterances and in verbless clauses (28). It can also be noted that both structures have a verbal counterpart and constitute, therefore, grammaticalized forms that encode this information structure syntactically.

- (25) Por mí, sí.    ‘As for me, yes.’  
 (26) Por mí, estupendo.                                      ‘As for me, great.’  
 (27) ¡Sí que hace calor! Hace calor.                      ‘It is indeed very hot! It is hot.’  
 (28) ¡Seguro que va a venir! Va a venir seguro.                      ‘Sure he is coming! He is coming for sure.’

Sixthly, another particularity of polar utterances is that they can appear in tag questions. This property is also present in modal epistemic verbless clauses, like *¿verdad?* ‘True / Isn’t it?’ in the example *Lo has visto, ¿verdad?* ‘You saw it, didn’t you?’.

These observations show that prophrases share properties with both fragments and verbless clauses but do not align completely with neither, but they seem to constitute a third type of phrastic unit. This idea is confirmed by the property, pointed out by Rubattel (1982) for French, namely, prophrases have the same distribution as phrases and can, therefore, be embedded (29). This is a property that it shares with verbless clauses (30) and fragments (31).

- (29) Yo creo que sí.    ‘I think that yes.’  
 (30) Yo creo que seguro.                                      ‘I think that sure.’  
 (31) Yo creo que a las tres.                                      ‘I think that at three o’clock.’

Indeed, if we count the frequencies of these three kinds of units in the corpus, we can notice that fragments and verbless clauses are not very frequent in



subordination (69 cases of the existing 3 594, and 11 out of 1 646 respectively), unlike polar utterances, which are quite frequent (443 out of 1084). These observations show that polar utterances are much frequently embedded than verbless clauses and fragments.

Finally, we consider the information structure of verbless clauses and polar clauses. Following the analysis of Lambrecht (1994) and Neeleman and Vermeulen (2012), we distinguish a double accumulative pattern in the informative structure of the clause: topic – background, and, within the comment, the dichotomy formed by the focus and the background. The topic indicates the question under discussion, and the comment, what is said about it. Within the comment, the focus constitutes a part of information that is highlighted or contrasted, while the background is formed by the known information. According to Lambrecht (1994), neither the topic nor the focus always needs to appear in a clause.

In this way, we can note that polar clauses and verbless clauses seem to share the same informational patterns, such as the structure topic – comment, as seen in examples (25-26). They also seem to share another pattern, both informative and syntactic. In fact, it can be noted that examples (32-33) have both a head – complement structure: in (32), the prophrase has a clausal complement, while in (33), it is the adverbial phrase *menos mal* ‘fortunately’ that selects a clause. This syntactic structure is parallel to the structure triggered by syntax: the head introduces the informational focus, while the complement, composed of already known information, constitutes the background. In this way, polar clauses and verbless clauses share three important properties: firstly, they are both headed structures; secondly, they share the same syntactic structures (head only, periphrastic – head, head – adjunct and head – complement).

- |      |   |  |
|------|---|--|
| (32) | Yo sí que voy air al trabajo.             | ‘As for me, I am going to work’        |
| (33) | ¡Menos mal que tú vas a venir al trabajo! | ‘Fortunately, you are coming to work!’ |

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of polar utterances has shown that they behave in a unique way. They form syntactic units with a phrastic content, just as fragments, verbal clauses and predicative verbless clauses, but they display some differences with all of them.

On the one hand, they share a number of properties with fragments: firstly, they both recover part of their content from a source utterance; secondly, they are not discursively autonomous; thirdly, the speech act of both is determined by their relationship with the source and by the syntactic and semantic properties of both.

On the other hand, they share some other properties with verbless clauses: firstly, they are both headed structures with a diversity of syntactic structures, which contrast with fragments, which are non-headed structures formed by

the remnant of an ellipsis. In this way, the head of verbless clauses and polar clauses has selectional properties that determine the distribution of the clause. Secondly, both have similar information structures.

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the properties shared by the three clausal structures: verbless clauses, polar clauses and fragments. On the one hand, polar clauses and fragments share some properties: they do not express the full content they convey (indicated in Table 1 as ‘full cont’); they are not discursively autonomous (i.e. they cannot appear alone in a discourse without preceding context) (indicated in Table 1 as ‘Discours utonom’), and they do not have an independent speech act, but it is determined by their relationship with a preceding utterance (‘Indep speech act’ in Table 1).

On the other hand, polar clauses are more similar to verbless clauses in other aspects; firstly, they are both headed structures (‘headed’ in Table 1) with a determined set of available syntactic structures (‘Syntstr’ in Table 1), which contrast with fragments, which are non-headed structures formed by the remnant of an ellipsis. Also, both share the same information patterns: topic – comment and focus – background. These properties suggest that polar utterances constitute indeed a different kind of syntactic unit that must be considered as a different kind of clause: together with verbal clauses, verbless clauses, and fragments, verbless polar clauses find their place as a separate phrastic unit in discourse.

*Table 1 Properties of verbless structures*

	Full cont	Discours autonom	Indep speech act	Headed	Syntstr	Info str
Verbless cl.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Polar cl.	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fragments	No	No	No	No	No	No

Furthermore, polar clauses are different from verbless clauses and fragments in their capacity of being embedded. Indeed, as seen in the previous section, polar clauses are as frequent in subordination as verbal clauses, and much more than fragments and verbless clauses. It seems that in verbless clauses, the head invariably contains an informational focus, which is relatively rare in subordination, whereas in polar clauses, the head contains a contrastive focus, expressing a different polarity from the source utterance, which is frequent in every syntactic context. Nevertheless, this observation needs verification and constitutes the basis for future work.

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