

Insubordinate hypothetical manner constructions in French and Spanish: A pilot study

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This paper presents a pilot study of insubordinate hypothetical manner constructions (‘as if’) in French (*comme si*) and Spanish (*como si*). On the basis of the theoretical framework provided by Evans (2007) and Olguín-Martínez (2021), we analyse data from both written and spoken corpora and we propose a four-way constructional typology that establishes the different meanings such constructions can express and the discourse functions they can serve, and links these to patterns of tense-aspect-mood marking. Thus, we move beyond previous findings and add three more construction types to Brinton’s (2014) *denial of an assumption* type: a *nuanced agreement* type that serves the discourse function of expressing partial agreement with some preceding discourse; a *discursive elaboration or reformulation* type in which the speaker fully agrees with the preceding discourse and only reformulates or adds new information to it; and a *scalar evaluation* type, which belongs to the evaluative-attitudinal domain and shows distinct formal characteristics (only type found to show indicative mood + present tense TAM marking in Spanish).

1. Introduction

This paper investigates hypothetical manner constructions in French and Spanish, and proposes a four-way constructional typology of insubordinate *comme si* and *como si* ('as if') clauses, i.e. clauses introduced by these conjunctions but used without an accompanying main clause (cf. Evans 2007), as in (1) and (2).

- (1) *French* (Giving instructions, *apud* Orféo)
A: *Pas loin de chez elle, en plus.*
B: *Tu sais, comme si tu te*
you know as if you yourself
dirige-ais vers le Grand Large.
head_for-IND.PST.2SG towards the Grand Large
A: 'Not far from her place, also.'
B: 'You know, as if you headed for the *Grand Large*'
- (2) *Spanish* (Girl reading a magazine, *apud* Val.Es.Co)
"Sexualidad, chicos... conoce sus puntos débiles."¹
¡Como si no lo sup-iéramos, de verdad!
as if not it know-SBJV.PST.1PL of truth
"Sexuality, boys... know their weaknesses." As if we didn't
know that, to be honest!

¹ [The speaker is reading out loud a quote by someone else]

Both (1) and (2) are examples of insubordinate hypothetical manner clauses (henceforth HM clauses). As Olguín-Martínez (2021) points out (following both Fuchs' (2014) and Treis' (2018) classifications), hypothetical manner constructions are a subtype of qualitative comparative constructions to the extent that they "bring together the two terms of a comparison on the basis of similarity or likeness" (Fuchs 2014:133, as cited in Olguín-Martínez 2021:7). More specifically, Dixon (2009:35) explains that, while in *real manner*

constructions “the action described by the Focal clause is done in the manner described by the Supporting clause”, in *hypothetical manner* constructions “[...] the Supporting clause may describe what it [the action] pretends to be or what it might be (*but isn't*)” (emphasis added). The semantics of such constructions thus imply polarity reversal, i.e. they “trigger a proposition with the opposite polarity to what is marked, at some level in the interpretation” (Verstraete & Luk 2021: 288) (cf. Verstraete & D’Hertefelt 2014 on Dutch *alsof* ‘as if’).¹ Thus, in example (1), speaker A won’t actually head for the *Grand Large*, but only take the same direction *as if* (s)he was doing so; and, in example (2), the speaker of the *como si* clause actually knows about boys’ weaknesses, and conveys that the reported speaker is talking *as if* she didn’t know. In sum, the hypothetical manner value of the *comme si* and *como si* constructions can be understood as a comparison that “portrays an imagined [...], or counterfactual [...] situation” (Olguín-Martínez 2021:9).

At the same time, (1) and (2) are also examples of insubordinate clauses because they instantiate the “conventionalized main clause use of what, in prima facie grounds, appear to be formally subordinate clauses” (Evans 2007:369). If we assess the degree of syntactic integration of these clauses (through proportionality and clefting tests, as discussed in §2), we observe that, even if their formal properties are those of a subordinate clause (i.e. presence of *comme si* and *como si* as subordinating conjunctions), they cannot be analysed as dependent on a main clause the way subordinate clauses are, thus functioning as independent clauses. By contrast, (3) and (4) are examples of subordinate HM clauses because the *como*

¹ The notion of polarity reversal originated in the study of counterfactual constructions (see Van linden & Verstraete 2008). Yet, Verstraete & D’Hertefelt (2014) show that the phenomenon is frequent in insubordinate constructions, adducing evidence from Dutch, and can be triggered by different mechanisms.

si and the *comme si* clauses are syntactically dependent on a main-clause verb (*es* and *parle* respectively).

- (3) *Spanish* (About insurance, *apud* Val.Es.Co)
Claro, entonces es como si no
of.course then is as if not
est-uvier-a asegurad-a.
be-SBJV.PST-3SG insured-F
'Of course, it is then as if she didn't have an insurance.'
- (4) *French* (About a human talking to their cat, *apud* Valibel)
Et puis, il lui parle comme si c'
and then he him talk as if it
ét-ait un-e personne.
be-IND.PST.3SG a-F person
'And then he talks to it as if it were a person.'

What we can also observe in these two examples (and this works for French and Spanish equally) is that HM constructions can function as either complement (3) or adverbial (4) clauses. As already observed by, among others, López-Couso & Méndez-Naya (2012b:174), "[i]n addition to the basic adverbial use [...], these subordinators can occasionally be found in complementation structures introducing finite declarative clauses". While in the literature adverbial insubordination (Schwenter 2016, Bossaglia et al. 2017, Horie 2018, Debaisieux et al. 2019, Lastres-López 2020) and complement insubordination (Verstraete et al. 2012, D'Hertefelt & Verstraete 2014, Gras & Sansiñena 2017) have been discussed separately, we observe that, for HM constructions, the borderline between these categories is blurred because of the ambivalent status of the conjunction by which they are introduced (cf. López-Couso & Méndez-Naya 2015).

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As Olguín-Martínez (2021:12) notes, “once adverbial hypothetical manner constructions develop into complement clauses, they may develop into insubordinate clauses”, and he thus proposes a diachronic pathway (Figure 1) for the appearance of such insubordinate constructions.

Adverbial clause > complement clause (‘to look’ or ‘to seem’) >
complement clause (‘to act’ or ‘to behave’) > insubordinate clause

Figure 1: Olguín-Martínez’s (2021:12) pathway for hypothetical
manner insubordination

This idea is also found in López-Couso & Méndez-Naya’s (2012b:181) paper on *as if*, *as though* and *like* and in Brinton’s (2014) study on exclamatory *as if*, in which she proposes a “development of monoclausal *as if* [...] involving ellipsis of complement clauses in *it is/looks/seem* [sic] *as if*... structures rather than directly from adjunct adverbial clauses” (Brinton 2014:93).

Adjunct clause (comparison/manner) > complement clause
(following *be*, *look*, *seem*) > monoclausal > bare complementizer

Figure 2: Brinton’s (2014:108) postulated development of
exclamatory *as if*

From a cross-linguistic perspective, HM constructions had remained “unexplored territory in that no previous studies ha[d] addressed the precise semantic and discourse functions of this type of comparative clauses” (Olguín-Martínez 2021:7, paraphrasing Hetterle 2015:195) up until Olguín-Martínez’s very study. This scarcity of scholarly attention holds even more for insubordinate HM constructions – Brinton’s (2014) study on exclamatory *As if!* in English and Looji &

Minnaert's (2019) squib on Dutch *alsof* clauses form notable exceptions.

Thus, this paper aims to further fill this gap in the literature by analysing examples of insubordinate HM clauses like (1) and (2) from a constructional perspective, establishing the different meanings they can express and discourse functions they can serve, and examining how these are reflected by formal marking – that is, it seeks to set up a formal-functional typology of hypothetical manner insubordination. In (2), for example, the speaker uses a *como si* clause featuring a past subjunctive verb form to deny an assumption from the preceding discourse: ‘Of course we know boys’ weaknesses (so why this command?)’. In (1), by contrast, speaker B uses a *comme si* clause featuring a past indicative form to elaborate on what speaker A has just said – here fully accepting the turn of their interlocutor without any nuance, unlike in (2) –: ‘It is the same way as if you wanted to go to the *Grand Large*’.

To do so, our study is based on the analysis of an *ad hoc*, synchronic collection of spoken and written instances of *como si* and *comme si* clauses, which also includes examples of canonical subordinate uses of hypothetical manner constructions, as in (3) and (4). This way we are able to investigate which linguistic features characterise the insubordinate uses in comparison with their subordinate counterparts, both in French and Spanish.

We observe that, while the formal features of the insubordinate HM constructions (like the role of tense-aspect-mood (TAM) marking) are language-specific, a shared functional typology can be posited for these constructions in both languages. Specifically, we propose a four-way classification in which, in addition to Brinton's (2014) *denial of an assumption* type, we include three types which have gone undocumented so far: *nuanced agreement*, *discursive elaboration or reformulation*, and a *scalar evaluation* type.

This paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we discuss methodological issues, such as the extracted data, basic sorting of the data, and the parameters used for the analysis, which is in turn presented in Section 3. The results will be discussed and summarized in Section 4.

2. Data and methodology

As mentioned above, this paper aims to arrive at a constructional typology of insubordinate HM clauses. For this, we draw on data collected from spoken corpora, written corpora and social media.

For French *comme si* clauses, we extracted an exhaustive sample from the oral component of the *Orféo* database (Benzitoun et al. 2016; spoken data), which includes many different corpora. For Spanish *como si* clauses, we extracted an exhaustive sample from the *Valencia Español Coloqial* corpus (henceforth Val.Es.Co, Pons 2019; spoken, conversational data) and two random 100-hit samples from the esTenTen18 corpus (written data from the Internet) through SketchEngine, one targeting *pero como si* strings, and another one targeting *por mí como si* strings (see §3.2). These datasets were complemented with random 20-hit samples from Twitter (social media data) for both languages.

Once the data extracted, we implemented different sorting tasks. In a first step, we removed cases where the *comme si/como si* strings did not introduce a HM clause, as in (5).

(5) *Je vais vous demander s'il y a des circonstances... comme si on est dans des activités de détente pendant les études [...] où l'accent d'une même personne peut varier.*

'I will ask you if there are some circumstances... such as when we are engaged in some relaxing activities during our studies [...], in which a single person's accent can change.'

We conducted this sorting task by applying a proportionality test. This test, as Debaisieux (2016:3-4) explains, consists in verifying whether the “substitution of the constituents containing lexical elements by paradigms of pronouns that are proportional to this constituent” is possible or not. More precisely, the test concerns *internal proportionality* to the extent that it relates to the internal structure of the conjunction (Smessaert et al. 2005). That is, since in (5) the *si*-part can be replaced with a demonstrative pronoun – (*Je vais vous demander s’il y a des circonstances comme celles-ci [...]*) –, this and similar examples were discarded.

The second sorting task responded to the need to differentiate truly insubordinate cases like (1) and (2) from cases like (6), which are seemingly insubordinate but, in fact, are still dependent on the main clause of the preceding sentence.

(6) *French* (Conversation, *apud* Valibel)

[...] *il sait prendre la parole* [...] *comme s’*
 he knows take the speech as if
il l’ avait préparé. Comme si c’
 he it had prepared as if it
ét-ait un fond bien prépar-é [...].
 be-IND.PST.3SG a.M background well prepare-PTCP
 ‘[...] he can talk [...] as if he had prepared it. As if it was a
 well-prepared background [...].’

We used a clefting test for that purpose (Smessaert et al. 2005; Verstaete 2007: ch. 7), in which we downranked the *comme si/como si* clause into the nominal complement slot of an *it*-cleft and used the (main clause of the) preceding sentence in the cleft relative clause. Thus, if the test yields a grammatically well-formed sentence (the clefting of the HM clause is possible), this means that the analysed clause is integrated in the main clause structure of the preceding

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sentence, and is hence a subordinate clause with a recycled main clause (which is the case in (6), where the result would be *C'est comme si c'était un fond bien préparé qu'il sait prendre la parole*). By contrast, if the test results in an ungrammatical or nonsensical sentence (the clefting of the HM clause is not possible), the analysed clause is not integrated in the main clause structure of the preceding sentence and we are dealing with an insubordinate clause.

After these two sorting tasks, the resulting distribution of the relevant data and the share of insubordinate clauses in the corpora can be presented as in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of the data in the corpora

Language	Corpus	Sample	Hits	Insubordinate cases	
				Absolute	Relative
French	Orféo	Exhaustive	215	21	9.76%
	Twitter	Random	20	9	45%
	Subtotal French		235	30	12.76%
Spanish	Val.Es.Co	Exhaustive	16	8	50%
	esTenTen18	Random	100	27	27%
		<i>pero como si</i>			
	esTenTen18	Random	100	100	100%
		<i>por mí como si</i>			
Twitter	Random	20	12	60%	
Subtotal Spanish		236	147	62.29%	
Total			471	177	37.58%

For the analysis, we created a two-stage coding protocol. In the first part, we applied our analytical parameters to the whole sample (subordinate and insubordinate finite clauses), while in the second part, we only included the insubordinate examples and coded them for some parameters exclusively applicable to insubordinate cases, such as their overall meaning, the type of attitudinal meaning conveyed (if applicable), the way polarity reversal works, and their

discourse function. Sections 3 and 4 focus on the results of this second stage, and deal with insubordinate HM clauses only.

3. Formal-functional typology of insubordinate HM clauses

The analysis of the HM clauses from our samples revealed that (i) Spanish *como si* clauses and French *comme si* clauses use TAM marking in a different way (as discussed in §3.1), and that (ii) functionally, we can identify and describe four types, three of which apply for both languages, while the fourth is only documented in Spanish (as discussed in §3.2). Table 2 details how the four types are distributed across the two languages studied.²

Table 2: Quantitative instantiation of the four functional types

Type	Spanish	French
1. Denial of an assumption	7	13
2. Nuanced agreement	28	1
3. Discursive elaboration or reformulation	10	16
4. Scalar evaluation	102	0
Total	147	30

3.1 Formal characteristics

Although French and Spanish are genealogically closely related and have similar TAM paradigms, the two languages do not use the same TAM values for the construction of insubordinate *comme si* and *como si* clauses, and neither does TAM marking have the same role in them.

For French, we find quite stable TAM values – that is, all the examples show indicative mood. The sole variation we perceive is

² Note that the high frequency of the fourth type is due to the more specific queries used in searching the esTenTen18 corpus.

(9) *French* (Conversation about resolutions, *apud* Orféo)

A: *Ta bonne resolution?*

B: [...] *arrêter de fumer.*

A: *Comme si t' all-ais réuss-ir.*
as if you go-IND.PST.2SG succeed-INF

A: 'Your good intention?'

B: '[...] quit smoking.'

A: 'As if you would succeed.'

In Spanish, by contrast, TAM marking does not serve to temporally locate the situation of the *como si* clause vis-à-vis the speech event. Rather, it relates to the overall semantics of the construction (as we will see in §3.2). The most frequent combination of TAM values is that of subjunctive mood + past tense, as in (2), just like in its subordinate counterpart (3).

The only consistent variation in TAM that we can find in Spanish is restricted to a single functional type, i.e. the scalar evaluation construction type, all examples of which show indicative mood + present tense (see example (12) in §3.2.4).

3.2 Functional typology

Although we were not able to find formal resemblances between Spanish and French insubordinate HM clauses, our analysis reveals that we can develop a functional typology that suits both languages (almost) perfectly. In this section, we identify and describe in detail each type on the basis of pragmatic and semantic features.

3.2.1 Denial of an assumption

The first type to be discussed has already been identified by Brinton (2014); it corresponds to her description of English monoclausal *as if* constructions below.

Monoclausal *as if* constructions [...] have lost their conditional meaning, express negative epistemic stance, have the performative force of a denial/refutation, and express the speaker's exclamatory/evaluative attitude. (Brinton 2014:101-102)

Polarity reversal is indeed key to understanding how HM constructions – as much in French as in Spanish – work semantically (see Section 1). What is characteristic of this first type is that here the reversed-polarity interpretation is at issue in the interaction, i.e. it is the main point of the speaker's utterance (cf. Verstraete & D'Hertefelt 2014). Constructions of this first type are “cases where an affirmative assumption is being denied and a negative asserted [...], but also cases where a negative assumption is being denied and a positive asserted” (Brinton 2014:101).

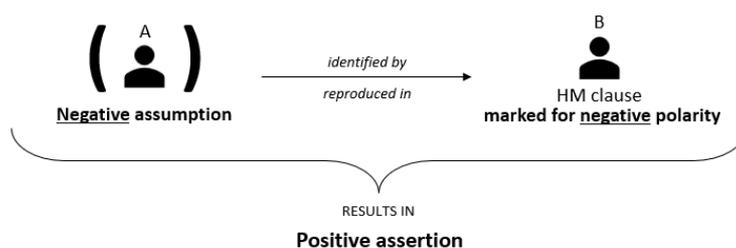


Figure 3: Schema of polarity reversal yielding *positive assertion*

As shown in Figure 3, in a *positive assertion* case, speaker B identifies a negative assumption in a discourse act by speaker A (who can be real, evoked by reported speech or created by B in a

soliloquy). Speaker B then reproduces this negative value in a HM clause that is marked for negative polarity, which ultimately results in a positive assertion of its content.³ Pragmatically, speaker B uses the HM clause to judge the preceding discourse infelicitous and to assert the reason of that judgement.

Applied to example (2), the speaker uttering the HM clause assumes that the speaker they quote does not believe that their interlocutor does not know about boys' weaknesses – why would they otherwise have uttered the recommendation? In response to that, the speaker utters the in subordinate HM clause to express a positive assertion (coded in a clause marked for negative polarity) to question the appropriateness of the quoted content and emphatically signal the reason why: 'Since we already know about that, your assumption is wrong and your imperative statement inappropriate'.

3.2.2 *Nuanced agreement*

The second functional type, found in both French and Spanish, has gone unnoticed so far. *Nuanced agreement* – as we have called it – serves the discourse function of expressing partial agreement with some preceding discourse, as in (10).

More precisely, speakers use this type of clauses to signal a mismatch between the previous discourse and some expectations or implications that can be associated with it based on their knowledge/interpretation of reality. Note that this type involves HM clauses whose content (abstracting away from the contribution of the conjunction for now) refers to the opposite of what is stated in the preceding discourse.

³ Cases of *negative assertion*, like (7) and (9), work in the same way, just with the opposite polarity values (*positive* when *negative* and vice versa). That is, polarity reversal is symmetrical in hypothetical manner clauses (cf. Verstraete & D'Hertefelt 2014 for Dutch).

- (10) *Spanish* (Conversation, *apud* Val.Es.Co)
 A: *Oye, que estoy yo, eh. No quiero asistir a una ruptura matrimonial.*
 B: *No estamos casados.*
 A: *Como si lo est-uvierais.*
 as if it be-SUBJ.PRS.2PL
 A: ‘Hey, I don’t want to witness a marital breakdown.’
 B: ‘We are not married.’
 A: ‘As if you were.’

Polarity reversal works differently in this type than in the previous one (as shown in Figure 4). The reversed-polarity interpretation ‘you are not married’ is not the main point of Speaker’s A retort, in which case Speaker A would merely repeat Speaker B. Rather, the main point is that to Speaker A *it seems as if* Speaker B and her partner are married, that is, which is attitudinal (non-epistemic) assessment.

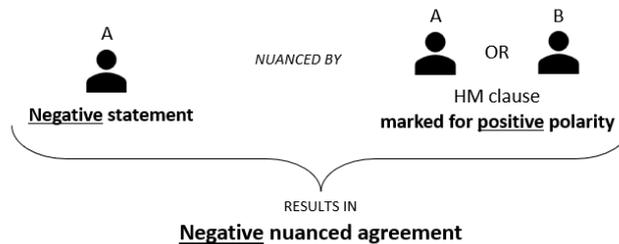


Figure 4: Schema of polarity reversal yielding *negative nuanced agreement*

In a case of *negative nuanced agreement*, as in (10), a speaker A utters a negative statement, which is partially accepted and partially

contested by the same speaker or by a speaker B by means of an insubordinate clause marked for positive polarity.⁴

The HM clause thus expresses positive agreement with the explicit content of the preceding discourse, as the speaker recognizes the *hypothetical* nature of the HM clause, but also signals partial disagreement by the very act of comparing the preceding discourse content to the opposite scenario, thus signalling that there are reasons to question some implications or expectations associated with the preceding content. In (10), the HM clause can be paraphrased as ‘I agree that you are not married, but that is not the whole truth, because you act as if you were and that justifies why I used the term *marital* before’.

3.2.3 *Discursive elaboration or reformulation*

The third type we found is functionally close to the *nuanced agreement* type in that it basically expresses hypothetical manner and pragmatically marks agreement with the preceding discourse. However, in *discursive elaboration or reformulation* cases, the speaker of the HM clause fully agrees with what has been said and implied, using the HM clause therefore only to reformulate or add some new information to the interaction without contesting the preceding discourse.

Out of the four types identified, this third type is most similar to subordinate hypothetical manner constructions (cf. §1): the preceding discourse is unreservedly compared to a hypothetical situation in the HM clause, as in (11). Therefore, the reversed-polarity interpretation (‘you had registered (for the course)’) is not at issue; it is not the main point of the utterance, it is merely evoked by the basic hypothetical manner meaning of the conjunction. In

⁴ For reasons of space limits, we could not include examples, but this also works in the opposite way for *negative nuanced agreement* cases.

interaction, then, this type serves to express the speaker's full agreement with the preceding discourse, and to add a reformulation or additional information showing the same argumentative orientation as the preceding discourse.

- (11) *Spanish* (About university courses, *apud* Val.Es.Co)
*Tendrías que haber renunciado a la asignatura. Anularte
la asignatura, o sea, como si no te hub-ieras
as if not REFL have-SBJV.PST.2SG
matriculado.
register-PTCP
'You needed to drop the course. Cancelling the course, I
mean, as if you had not register.'*

The difference between *reformulation* (11) and *elaboration* (1) lies in whether the speaker of the HM clause reformulates what has been said into their own words or elaborates on that by adding some new information that complements the preceding utterance. In terms of interaction, for both subtypes the preceding discourse (what is reformulated or elaborated upon in the HM clause) and the HM clause (expressing the reformulation or elaboration itself) can occur within a single speaker's turn or in turns by different speakers. As illustrated by (11) and (1), polarity reversal is also symmetrical in this subtype.

3.2.4 *Scalar evaluation*

Finally, we could identify a fourth functional type, viz. *scalar evaluation* clauses, which sets up a scale – that is, it involves scalarity (Gast & Van der Auwera 2011; Verstraete et al. 2012) – and puts a hypothetical situation at its extreme to express that, even if that extreme situation were the case, the speaker wouldn't mind or care. Speakers thus use this type to express an evaluation in terms of

indifference, which is the main point of such utterances; the reversed-polarity interpretation is never at issue. Semantically, therefore, this type belongs to the evaluative-attitudinal domain, and is very different from the previous three types. Its distinct semantics is reflected by its distinct formal characteristics, as this is the only type for which we consistently found indicative mood + present tense TAM marking in Spanish.

- (12) *Spanish* (Tweet about Australia, *apud* Twitter)
 A: *Australia no registra un solo contagio por segundo día.*
 B: *Con esas pedazo de arañas, como si*
 with those chunk of spiders as if
est-án siete año-s sin caso-s.
 be-IND.PRS.3PL seven year-PL without case-PL
 A: ‘Australia does not register any contamination for the second day running.’
 B: ‘Considering the presence of such big spiders, they could have no more [Covid] cases in seven years for all I care.’

In example (12), the speaker uses the *scalar evaluation* construction to state that, even if the Covid-19 situation in Australia were better than what was stated in the previous discourse (implied scalar-additive value), s/he wouldn’t care about that and would rather be more concerned by the presence of big spiders and other insects.

4. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the phenomenon of insubordination through the analysis of hypothetical manner constructions in French and Spanish, which have been understudied in the literature so far.

We observed that the distribution of insubordinate cases in the corpus data for the two different languages is quite unequal (cf. Table 1) – while Spanish has a medium ratio of insubordinate *como*

si cases (~60%), French insubordinate *comme si* constructions are rarer in the corpora consulted (~13%).⁵ We should be careful, however, not to extrapolate these results, mainly because our sample is too small to be truly representative of the actual distribution of insubordinate constructions in language use. We definitely need to – and will – extend our datasets.

Our analysis pointed out that the two languages differ in terms of the formal features of insubordinate hypothetical manner constructions: TAM marking in French was found to establish temporal relations between the insubordinate situation and the speech event, while TAM marking in Spanish was found crucial to the overall function of the insubordinate construction.

Focusing on these overall functions, the sister languages studied proved to share three functional types, while a fourth one was only documented for Spanish. Additionally, while certain semantic parameters are sometimes and somehow shared by different functional types (e.g. *nuanced agreement* and *discursive reformulation or elaboration* can both convey a certain degree of agreement with the preceding discourse), the communicative intention of the speaker proved to be crucial in their description and identification.

In sum, the more general and solid conclusion is that, despite the differences concerning the distribution of the examples within the corpora and of the insubordinate cases across the different constructional types, our study observes that insubordinate hypothetical manner clauses are formally constructed in a language-

⁵ This uneven distribution is also found across the constructional types, but it is mainly due to some differences in the queries used: while the first three types were identified in the data extracted by means of the general queries targeting the conjunctions only, almost all *scalar evaluation* cases were extracted through a more specific search targeting *por mí como si* (see Section 2).

specific way, but found to serve (almost) the same purposes across the two languages studied.

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