Meaning and interaction in Spanish independent *si*-clauses

Scott A. Schwenter[*]

The Ohio State University, USA

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper analyzes the coded meaning of the Spanish particle *si* (< conditional 'if') when it occurs with independent, asserted clauses. While previously analyzed as a marker of contrast, adversativity and/or discursive opposition, I show that these meanings are actually contextually-determined interpretations which arise in situated discourse, most typically in dialogic discourse between two interlocutors. The coded, non-truth-conditional meaning of *si* is argued instead to be epistemic in nature, marking the proposition that it accompanies as one that is obviously true to the speaker. This analysis allows for a unitary and unifying account of a number of diverse examples that are problematic for prior analyses. The analysis also permits a straightforward understanding of discourse patterns surrounding independent *si*-clauses, as well as their functional similarity to certain uses of conditional sentence structures.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

This paper deals with the use of the Spanish conjunction/particle *si* (typically translated into English as 'if') in independent clauses in (mainly) conversational discourse. A typical example of this use can be seen in (1), taken from a Facebook post (names have been changed to initials to conceal identities) Here, *si* prefaces an utterance consisting of a declarative sentence in the indicative mood, and it cannot be stressed or followed by a pause, i.e. it must be integrated into the same intonation unit as the clause that it introduces. It is in this sense distinguishable from the more well-known affirmative polarity particle *sí* 'yes', which is always stressed (and represented in the orthography with an acute accent on the vowel) and therefore can form its own intonation unit. In addition, as argued in detail by Schwenter (2002), the affirmative particle *sí* and the *si* of the independent clauses analyzed in this article can never co-occur.

(1)   [Commenting on the picture of the daughter of the author of the Facebook post, who is celebrating her birthday on the day of the post]
       MH: Que decir de V..si está hecha una princesa.!!
             'What to say about V..SI she's grown up to be a princess!'

The comment by MH on the picture of V is an extremely positive one and in the context of the birthday photo conveys the change in V since she was a girl to now as a young (16-year-old) woman. As in all examples to be presented in this paper, *si* in (1) does not add anything to the propositional content of MH's utterance, and could be removed without altering that content in the least. In addition, an interlocutor's potential objection such as ¡*No es verdad!* ('That's not true!') could never be

---

* 298 Hagerty Hall, 1775 College Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1340, USA. Tel.: +1 614 743 1464.
  E-mail address: schwenter.1@osu.edu.

interpreted as referring to the meaning conveyed by *si*, but rather only to the truth/falsity of the proposition "she's grown up to be a princess." The removal of *si* in (1) would however change the possibilities of contextually-bound interpretation, and specifically it would present MH's opinion as one that was open to debate or further comment/evaluation of V. The contribution of *si* is to present MH's assessment of V as one that is obvious and shared in the common ground of those reading the Facebook post.

Building on prior work of my own and that of others (Almela, 1985; Montolío Durán, 1999a,b; Rodríguez Ramalle, 2011, 2014; Schwenter, 1996, 1999a,b, 2000, 2002), my main goal in this paper is to reveal what (non-truth-conditional) meaning is contributed by *si* in independent clauses. I assume that *si* in such contexts is a discourse particle that conveys "the speaker's epistemic attitude towards the propositional content of an utterance" (Zimmermann, 2011:2012), and that it contributes to the "use conditions" (Gutzmann and Gärtner, 2013; Gutzmann, 2015) of the utterance which it accompanies. Indeed, it can be demonstrated that the meaning conveyed by *si* does not contribute to truth conditions or to other content of the expressed proposition, but rather to the conditions on the felicitous use of an utterance containing an independent *si*-clause. From a more interactional perspective, I will also examine the effects that independent *si*-clauses have on continuation and projection in discourse (cf. Auer, 2005). I will argue that these effects clearly distinguish the use of *si* in independent clauses from its use in elliptical conditionals, and also provide a basis for situating the boundaries of "insubordination" (Evans, 2007, 2009), i.e. the conventionalized main clause use of a subordinate clause and/or subordinate clause marker.

The essential question that I strive to answer is one that has proven to be difficult for researchers working on discourse particles and erstwhile markers of subordination, like *si*, which can show up in non-subordinate contexts: how can we distinguish the coded meaning of such expressions from the meaning provided by the context of interpretation? A multitude of meanings has been assigned to *si* in the literature, but it is not always clear whether these meanings are presumed to form part of the inherent coded meaning or instead are just a feature of the (types of) discourse context in which independent *si*-clauses occur. The view to be put forth here is that there is one invariant, overarching meaning encoded by *si* in the independent-clause constructions, and other meanings are the result of recurring interpretations that arise due to the kinds of discourse contexts that provide hosts to *si*-marked utterances. Similar to other modal particles (cf. Repp, 2013), *si* functions as an operator of "common ground management" that "indicate[s] the *status* of a proposition relative to the C[ommon]G [round]" (Repp, 2013:231, emphasis original) in discourse, but these indications are not always part of the encoded meaning of *si*, but rather properties of discourse contexts in which independent *si*-clauses are employed by speakers. One of the main objectives of this paper is to determine precisely where the line ought to be drawn between the encoded meaning of *si*-marked independent clauses and how this meaning interacts with discourse-contextual contributions to interpretation.

The examples will be drawn from naturally-occurring sources such as conversations and social media, as well as the COLA-Madrid corpus of teenager conversations (http://www.colam.org/om_prosj-espannol.html; Jørgensen, 2014). Constructed examples will also be included in order to test qualitative hypotheses about the meaning/function of *si*-marked utterances in varying contexts.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I attempt to narrow down the coded meaning of *si* via the discussion of a number of naturally-occurring and constructed examples. Section 3 deals with independent *si*-clauses in discourse structure, and especially how these clauses are related to possible continuations of the discourse after being uttered. Section 4 analyzes independent *si*-clauses in the framework of "insubordination" (Evans, 2007; Evans and Watanabe, 2016), and posits that there is no clear distinction to be drawn between "subordinating" and "insubordinating" constructions with *si*, at least in terms of meaning and discourse function. Conclusions are offered in Section 5.

Before continuing, a note on the translation of *si* into English is in order. While the dictionary definition of 'if' is clearly not applicable, other suggested translations are also problematic. For example, anonymous reviewers suggested 'but' as a possible English equivalent to this use of *si*. As I argued in Schwenter (2002), there are two types of adversativity (originally termed PA and SN by Anscombre and Ducrot [1977]) encoded in Spanish grammar at both the sentential and discourse levels. While these types can be expressed in all languages, not all languages lexicalize the difference. In Spanish, the lexicalizations of PA and SN adversativity at the sentential level are *pero* and *sino* (both translatable as 'but'), respectively,[1] and I have argued extensively that *si* expresses the same kind of adversativity as the sentential conjunction *sino* but at the dialogic, extra-sentential level. Space restrictions do not allow me to go into greater detail here, and I therefore direct the interested reader to my 2002 article for description and analysis. What can be said here is that the translation of *si* into English as 'but' is wholly inadequate, primarily because 'but' is often compatible with a PA interpretation (and thus can co-occur with markers of agreement) but *si* never is (and is wholly impossible with co-occurring markers of agreement). Indeed, we have already seen in (1) a case where 'but' would not be an appropriate gloss for *si*, and I will point out other instances below where this translation is likewise inappropriate.

2. The coded meaning of *si*

In a number of recent papers, Gras (2013, 2015, 2016) and Gras and Sansiñena (2015) analyze free-standing *que*-constructions in Spanish conversational interaction, along lines that are extremely useful for the consideration of *si* in the present analysis. Like independent *si*-clauses (cf. Schwenter, 2016), *que*-constructions have also been analyzed as instances of

---

[1] In German the PA/SN distinction is lexicalized in the sentence conjunctions *aber* and *sondern*, respectively. Both are translated into English as 'but.'