How to Start a Request? A Contrastive Study of Alerters in Spanish by Speakers of L1 Spanish and L1 French

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Abstract

The formulation of requests has been widely studied in pragmatics, both within a (variety of) language and from a contrastive perspective. In this study, we will show the specific role of alerters (elements that precede the request head act and that serve to get the attention of the hearer on the request) in request formulation, comparing L1 speakers of Spanish and L2 speakers of Spanish with L1 French in Discourse Completion Tests and Naturalised Interactions. In doing so, we contribute to the contrastive pragmatic study of both languages. Our data reveal that there are statistically significant differences in the use of alerters from Spanish L1 and L2 speakers in the DCTS but not in the Naturalised Interactions. Alerters occur with rather similar frequencies in both groups, but there are qualitative differences as to which forms are adopted. At the methodological level, we highlight that data obtained from both groups’ DCTS vs. Naturalised Interactions show different results, thus underlining the importance of combined methods for contrastive pragmatics research.

Keywords

alerter – request – Discourse Completion Test – Naturalised Interaction – French – Spanish
1 Introduction

The formulation of requests has been widely studied in pragmatics, both within a language (variety) and from a contrastive perspective. The contrastive study of requests is situated at the crossroads of language- and culture-specific phenomena, and implies paying attention to the acquisition of the expression of requests in languages other than the L1. The request itself is often expanded with peripheral elements preceding or following the initial request. Those elements also impact in how coercively the request is formulated (Márquez Reiter, 2002).

In this article, we concentrate on one of those peripheral elements, namely the alerters in requests formulated by L1 speakers of Peninsular Spanish as compared to French-speaking learners of Spanish. As we will show, alerters are a broad category that includes various types of linguistic phenomena, such as discourse markers, greetings, apologies, which may be used in a way that goes beyond their initial meaning. We focus on the French-Spanish language pair since this is fairly understudied, although both languages are Romance languages and there is frequent contact between the French-speaking and the Spanish-speaking world.

In this introductory part, we first offer a brief overview on the contrastive study of requests (2.1) before proceeding to discussing the contrastive pragmatics of French and Spanish (2.2) and, finally, alerters (2.3). We will then present the data and methods used for this study (3), analyse the data (4) before offering a discussion of these results and our conclusions (5).

2 Background to the Study

2.1 The Contrastive Study of Requests

The speech act of requesting has been studied extensively during the past decades. The vast majority of the studies concern a combination of English and other languages, especially English with Spanish (Carduner, 1998; Márquez Reiter, 2000; Pinto, 2005; Pinto and Raschio, 2007; Schauer, 2009; Flores Salgado, 2011, among others). Other studies, however, have focused on the contrast between different varieties of Spanish for different linguistic phenomena and/or different types of corpus methods. Curcó (1998), Félix-Brasdefer (2005), Nicholls (2009) and Orozco (2009) worked on the Mexican variety. López Díaz (2012), Toledo Vega (2012), César Vera (2013) and Toledo and Toledo (2014) studied the Chilean Spanish – contrasted to Venezuelan Spanish in César Vera
(2013). Other varieties of Spanish concern Ecuador (Placencia, 1998), Uruguay (Márquez Reiter, 2002) or the Canary Islands (González Cruz, 2014). Different handbooks exist, offering larger overviews on Spanish linguistics and including, among others, studies on Spanish pragmatics and speech acts (Márquez Reiter, 2005; Placencia and Powell, 2020) and (im)politeness (López Cordero, 2009; Placencia y García, 2002). Although these different works represent valuable pieces to understand the production of requests in their respective languages, conducting cross-cultural research between L1 and L2 also offers important information on the actual language use by different speaker profiles. Further, not all of these studies have looked into the presence of alerters, but rather on the request head act, the use of mitigation devices, the concepts of distancia and acercamiento (César Vera, 2013) or even the prosodic transfer in requests (Aronsson, 2015). Moreover, to our knowledge, very few empirical studies deal with Spanish L1 compared to Spanish L2 by French-speaking learners (see Marsily, 2018, for an analysis of mitigation in Spanish L2 requests produced by French-speaking students).

2.2 The Contrastive Pragmatics of French and Spanish
Since we focus on comparing L1 speakers of Peninsular Spanish with L2 speakers whose L1 is (the Belgian variety of) French, it is important to consider the contrastive pragmatics of French and Spanish, since speakers’ L1 may influence their L2 production. French and Spanish share a genetic link, being both Romance languages. They are moreover geographically close in Europe and have a long-standing pedagogical tradition (especially Spanish in France) and translating practice. It is therefore surprising that the body of research on the contrastive pragmatics of French and Spanish is fairly limited. Some exceptions are Fagard (2010), who discusses the lesser grammaticalization – and hence different use – of French discourse marker regarde as opposed to Spanish mira. Schneider (2007: 177) documents differences as to the mobility of reduced parentheticals. In terms of speech acts, Goethals and Blancke (2013), show that, in the context of the European Parliament, thanking strategies function with a similar frequency and position within the intervention in French and Spanish, the difference being that in the French data, thanking frequently accompanies negative or mixed appreciations – thus mitigating them–, whereas the Spanish thanking strategies accompany positive appreciations. In the field of the pragmatics of person reference, Stewart’s (1992) analysis of editorial meetings shows vacillation between T- and V-address in French – subject to hierarchical and gender differences – whereas the T-form is only used in Spanish. Her 2012 paper elaborates on the higher frequency of explicitly performative
hedges with a 1st person singular form in French editorial meetings and parliamentary debates than in Spanish ones, as opposed to a higher frequency of quality and attitude hedges in Spanish. Focussing on generic 2nd person singular forms, Kluge (2012) shows that they are more frequent in Spanish than in French, while also highlighting the importance of genre-specific features. With a focus on nominal forms of address, Castillo Lluch (2014) shows among others that a mere address form Monsieur/Madame is used in French political debate and telephone service interactions, whereas Señor/Señora in Spanish is almost always used in combination with the last name and, in the telephone interactions, much less frequent altogether. León Miranda (2014) documents a higher presence of nominal forms of address in Spanish informal interactions than in French. However, to our knowledge, contrastive studies concerning requests in Spanish and French are lacking (Sampedro, 2020). This study aims at filling this gap and focuses on a specific element of the request, namely alerters.

2.3 Alerters
The seminal Coding Manual of Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper’s CCSARP project (1989) distinguishes, for each request, between alerters, head acts and supportive moves. The head act, which constitutes the central part or minimal unit with which the request is realised (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), may be optionally accompanied by external modification, such as alerters and/or supportive moves. The alerter is coded as an element that precedes the head act of the request (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989: 277), such as in Perdone, ¿puede repetir, por favor? ‘Excuse me (V), could you repeat, please?’, where perdone functions as an alerter to the request head act puede repetir, por favor, drawing the hearer’s attention to the speech act that follows.

The various elements that enter the category of alerters are the hearer’s name, nickname or title, terms of endearment, offensive terms, attention getting expressions such as Hey! and Excuse me, among others (Cardunuer, 1998: 82). Table 1 accounts for the alerters listed in the literature.

Márquez Reiter (2002) investigates the difference between indirectness and tentativeness. Indirectness modifies an utterance at a structural level. In the case of requests, this means that it modifies the head act. Tentativeness, on the other hand, modifies an utterance in a more flexible way, for it can occur in the request head act or in its peripheral elements. This is the reason why alerters can be considered mitigation devices. Some types of alerters, such as apologies, lower the level of threat of the FTA (Albelda, 2010; Albelda and...
Cesteró, 2011; Briz, 2007; Caffi, 1999, 2007, 2017). Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) initially gathered greetings, apologies and attention getters in the same category (attention getters). Nevertheless, for our study, it is interesting to separate them, as they serve different functions; a greeting serves as a form of salutation and an attention getter seeks to catch the hearer’s attention (and, in this sense, is perfunctory), although they both can serve various purposes. A greeting can also serve as an attention getter, while an attention getter which is not pragmalinguistically performed as a greeting does not necessarily function as pragmatic greeting. An apology, however, not only tries to get the hearer’s attention but also reduces the level of imposition of the request and points to a potential pity or, at least, tries to anticipate a possible threat for the hearer’s face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Moreover, while the mitigation function is generally recognised for discursive markers (Crible, 2017), we believe that a request is mitigated differently with discursive markers than with an apology, hence the separation in distinct categories.

Alerters can fulfil more than one function. In example (1), perdoná serves to apologise before formulating the proper request but it is also a way to call the hearer’s attention to what follows. Example (2) illustrates the use of a greeting (hola), which allows the opening of the conversation (Placencia, 2019: 11). Both cases are classified as alerters, but the former illustrates the possibility to mitigate the request (in addition to opening the speech act), whereas the latter does not hold the same function and rather serves to start the turn.

**Table 1:** Typology of alerters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greeting</td>
<td><em>hola</em> ‘hello’, <em>buenos días</em> ‘good day’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention getter</td>
<td><em>oye</em> ‘listen’, <em>mira</em> ‘look’, <em>eh</em> ‘eh’, <em>vale</em> ‘well’,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(discourse marker, onomatopoeia,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interjection)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology/Excuse</td>
<td><em>perdoná</em> ‘sorry’, <em>disculpe</em> ‘sorry’, <em>lo siento</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I’m sorry’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocative</td>
<td><em>Profesor</em> ‘Professor’, <em>Juan</em> ‘Juan’, <em>guapa</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘gorgeous’, <em>cariño</em> ‘sweetheart’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marsily (2022), adapted from Blum-Kulka et al. (1989)
In this paper, we focus on the use of alerters in requests. The latter are understood in a broad sense. In fact, we extend Searle's definition of requests to cases where the actual requestive force is more opaque or debatable, such as Oh there's a bag on the chair, to ask permission to move the bag, or to make the interlocutor move it. According to Searle (1969: 66) a request is "a directive speech act which counts as an attempt to get H [hearer] to do an act which S [speaker] wants H to do, and which S believes that H is able to do; and which is not obvious that H will do in the normal course of events or of H’s own accord". Searle further argued that “[t]hey may be very modest ‘attempts’ as when I invite you to do it or suggest that you do it, or they may be very fierce attempts as when I insist that you do it" (Searle, 1979: 11). Along these lines, some examples analysed in part 3 may be coded as non-conventionally indirect requests, i.e. hints, even though not all analyses of requests would include such structures (Leloup, 2011). Marsily (2022: 31-118) offers a more in-depth discussion of different requests strategies and of the possible inclusion of several strategies in the hints’ category. The results discussed in the present article build on and further develop some of the findings presented in Marsily (2022), such as alternative strategies to requests, that include cases where the requester negotiates the course of the action (Is it normal that I cannot read the sheet? In order to ask for a better copy.).

3 Data and Methods

Our data concern the formulation of requests by students towards professors. Questions in the Spanish subcorpus were extracted from the corpus COPINE (Corpus oral de peticiones en interacciones naturalizadas en español), compiled by Marsily (2022). The participants of this corpus were university students of Spanish philology whose L1 corresponds to the centro-peninsular variety of Spanish, spoken in the wider Madrid area (represented by a corpus reference ending with the letter E in the examples cited in this paper). For its part, the French corpus included Belgian French-speaking university students of a degree in the field of languages and linguistics who studied
Spanish (represented by $F$). Their self-attributed level is between B2 and C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2002), which also corresponds to the estimated level of their study program. Students who had been raised in more than one language were not included in the sample in order to exclude the possible influence or transfer from these other languages in the formulation of requests. Each group counted 60 participants, with the Spanish group containing 47 women and 13 men, and the Belgian group 50 women and 10 men. While gender imbalance is undoubtedly a limitation of this study, it reflects the gender ratios in the language degrees in both countries. The participants signed an informed consent for their participation. Given that part of the data is produced by L2 speakers, the examples reproduced in this article may contain non-standard language. While we will refer to the French-speaking students of Spanish as L2 speakers, we wish to point out that L2 is in this context an umbrella term, since Spanish may be the (chronological) L3 or L4 of some of the participants.

The data were obtained through two methods aiming at eliciting requests but without prompting for alerters or instructing the students to use them. On the one hand, participants took part in a spoken Naturalised Interaction (N1 henceforth), devised by Marsily (2022). This method, inspired by Tran's (2006) Naturalised Role-play aims at creating a situation in which the participant is unaware of the object of study, thus leading to more naturalistic data. Concretely, students were invited for an individual meeting with a professor under the pretext of participating in a writing task. The context in which they had to carry out the writing task presented a number of difficulties that could be resolved by formulating a spoken request. For instance, the professor gave the participants a copy with the task description that was barely legible by the students, thus creating a situation conducive to the production of a request for a better copy. This led to a total of 254 spoken requests produced by L1 and L2 students. The open-ended nature of the N1 led to a wider variety of answers, including strategies that strictly speaking are not requests, but that do fulfil similar communicative needs.

In addition to this N1, the same participants were asked to fill out a written Discourse Completion Test (Cohen and Olshtain, 1981; Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984), presenting various concrete situations in which a request is formulated by a student to a professor, in interactions that the student had to imagine to be face-to-face. Examples taken from these data contain DCT in their reference. In total, 5 situations were offered to the student in the N1s, out of which three were repeated in the DCTs, as can be seen in Table 2.
These data will be analysed both from a quantitative perspective, shedding light on the presence or absence of alerters and on their variety, and from a qualitative perspective. Our results are tested by means of a Fisher test. This is equivalent to a chi-square test, to calculate the significance of differences when the sample is small, i.e. where the data have frequencies under 5.

4 Results and Discussion

In this section, we first present the results of the analysis of alerters in the Naturalised Interactions (3.1), before proceeding to the Discourse Completion Tests results (3.2).

4.1 Alerters in the Naturalised Interactions

Table 3 presents the number of cases of alerters in the 254 requests formulated by Spanish L1 and L2 speakers in the N1 corpus. Data show that Spanish L1 speakers produce slightly more alerters than French-speaking learners of Spanish (29 cases vs. 25), although the presence of alerters is overall very limited in the N1. Indeed, in general, many requests in the corpus do not contain any type of alerter: 86 L1 requests vs. 110 L2 requests, in addition to 4 cases that could not be analysed (n.a.).

A Fisher test applied to Table 3 shows that these differences are statistically significant (two-tailed: p=0.03804). However, if we calculate the significance for the data excluding

1 Those cases concern three answers that were written in indirect discourse and one where the student did not fulfill the requirements of the task.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N1</th>
<th>DCT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Handbag</td>
<td>1. Asking for permission to move a handbag from the chair the student is required to sit on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pen</td>
<td>2. Asking for a pen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy</td>
<td>3. Asking for another copy because the copy is hardly legible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat</td>
<td>4. Asking the professor to repeat a question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating/drinking</td>
<td>5. Asking for something to eat or drink (at the start of the meeting, the professor said there were drinks and chocolates available for them, should they want some)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the non-analysable cases, thus focusing on the presence or absence of the alerters, he differences are not significant (two-tailed: \( p = .2195 \)) between L1 and L2 speakers.

The only type of alerter used in the N1s is the attention getter, which, as we will show, is a very different result from what is obtained through the DCTS. Qualitatively speaking, the alerters used in the N1s vary in terms of the vocabulary used. That is to say, some terms appear only in the Spanish L1 corpus, and vice versa. Table 4 (extracted from Marsily, 2022: 269) provides an overview of the vocabulary from the alerters produced by the Spanish L1 and L2 speakers of the N1s, out of which only attention getters were used.

We included in this table all the occurrences of words that precede the head act and that serve to capture the hearer’s attention. Prosody is key to analyse those attention getters as such. Cases like vale (‘well’), mh, pues (‘well’), bueno (‘well’) and a ver (‘let’s see’) serve the purpose of focusing the hearer’s attention to what comes next. A Fisher test shows that the differences in this table are statistically significant (two-tailed; \( p = .000067 \)). However, given the low frequency of some types, these results should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, there are some clear tendencies most notably as to the presence or absence of specific alerters in either group.

Thus, Table 4 displays a clear predilection for \( eh \) among the Spanish speakers (combined or not with other words) and \( uy \). In the L2 corpus, the former comes in second position (but with a lower frequency than in the L2 corpus) and the latter is not found at all. Moreover, other expressions such as \( oh \) and \( euh \), sometimes combined with other words, appear more frequently in the vocabulary of French-speaking learners of Spanish as a foreign language. Thus, the results tend to point out that the French-speaking learners of Spanish seem not to conform to the alerters frequently used by L1 speakers of Spanish. Moreover, some resources sound quite French-speaking, such as \( euh \). It appears clearly as the equivalent of the Spanish \( eh \), but it is influenced by French pronunciation.
In example (3), where the question appears in situation 1 (handbag), the Spanish speaker attracts the teacher’s attention by means of the discourse marker *a ver* ‘let’s see’ and it is followed by a non-verbal request. By pointing with her finger, the student is directing the teacher’s gaze towards the handbag on the chair. This is an example of a non-verbal request, where the student indirectly asks the teacher if the situation is normal and, by doing so, negotiates the course of events. This strategy has been assimilated to the non-verbal requests, which is realised by means of a gesture only. Indeed, while the corpus collected answers to stimuli created in order to generate requests, some answers, such as the student’s reaction, deviate from the classic request typologies but were added to the category of alternative requests. These strategies are responses “to communicative situations where a request could have appeared but where the speaker decided not to formulate a request” (Marsily, 2022: 113).

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**TABLE 4** Alerters in the L1 and L2 Naturalised Interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attention getters</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>L2 (L1 French)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>eh</em> ‘eh’</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>a ver</em> ‘let’s see’</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ay</em> ‘oh’</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>pues oye</em> ‘well listen’</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>vale</em> ‘well’</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>pero</em> ‘but’</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>bueno</em> ‘well’</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>pues eh</em> ‘well er’</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>mh</em> ‘mh’</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>pues</em> ‘well’</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ay</em> ‘oh’</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>oh</em> ‘oh’</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>euh</em> ‘euh’</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>oh euh</em> ‘oh euh’</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>euh a ver</em> ‘euh let’s see’</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>es que</em> ‘it’s just that’</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>yups</em> ‘oops’</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ah</em> ‘ah’</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(toser)</em> cough</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total alerters</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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The case of *oh* in the alternative request strategy in (4) may be more questionable because it does not only attract the attention of the interlocutor, but also expresses surprise on the part of the French-speaking learner. However, even so, it should be noted that this discourse marker, which initiates the turn, does not appear in the L1 lexical repertoire. As shown in Table 3, in the L2 corpus it appears 8 times, including once in combination with *euh*.

(4)  
<IN_009_FF>  
*oh hay un bolso* (*fragmento ininteligible*)  
*oh* there is a bag (*unintelligible fragment*)  
<PROFE>  
*oh perdón* (*fragmento ininteligible*) *(risa)*  
*oh sorry* (*unintelligible fragment*) *(laughter)*  
(COPINE_IN_009_FF)

While *oh* is used only by the French-speaking learners, *euh* is found only in the corpus of Spanish learners. In (5) it is combined with *oh*. As in the previous example, it can be interpreted both as an expression of surprise (*oh*) and as a call for attention by means of the words *oh euh*. It even denotes a certain hesitation on the part of the L2 speaker, evidenced by the repeated words that follow (‘there’s a // there’s a’), and by the search for the correct word to use in the context (‘a// bag a bag’). Even so, by starting his sentence with *oh euh* the speaker captures the attention of his interlocutor.

(5)  
<PROFE>  
*sí sí estoy bueno // |- intenté*  
yes, yes, I’m well// - I tried to
The situational variation is illustrated in Table 5 (based on Marsily, 2022: 271-272). As can be seen, the attention getters are counted only a limited number of times in the L1 and L2 NI corpus.

With a total of 25 occurrences and maximum 11 in an individual situation, it is difficult to draw far-reaching general conclusions. However, more alerters are present in situations 1 (handbag) and 2 (pen), probably because they correspond to the initial stages of the interaction, which is a moment where there is no exchange yet. The situation in which they appear the least is 4 (repeat), which makes sense given that the student reacts immediately to a question he/she did not understand. Therefore, in the latter case, there is no need to call the listener's attention. Situations 3 (copy) and 5 (eating/drinking) are in between the most and least frequent, with 11 and 6 cases respectively. In the case of situation 5, the request also appears as a second turn of speech, after having asked for the question to be repeated (situation 4), so it is logical not to record more cases of alerters in this situation.

4.2 Alerters in the Discourse Completion Tests

In the DCTS the variety of alerters used is much wider than those in the NIS, which suggests that the methodology used to retrieve the data might influence the results. The DCTS contain less spontaneous interaction (the answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>L2 (L1 French)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (handbag)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (pen)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (copy)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (repeat)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (eating/drinking)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total alerters</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
are written) than the N1s and this might explain why students add more alerters than in the N1s, where they already have the attention of the professor. As highlighted in Table 6, which shows the number of requests that contain any type of alerter, among the 360 requests of the corpus, 79 did not contain any type of alerter and 5 answers could not be analysed because they were incomplete or formulated in indirect speech. From the 279 requests left, 131 Spanish requests are modified by an alerter, which is slightly less frequent than those used by French-speaking learners (145). A Fisher test applied to Table 6 indicates that these differences are not statistically significant, when including the non-analysable cases (two-tailed: p=.1461). When excluding them, thus focussing on the presence or absence of the alerters, the differences are not significant either (two-tailed: p=.1605). In short, the presence of alerters does not differ significantly between L1 speakers of Spanish and French-speaking learners.

However, a Fisher test applied to Table 7, comparing the frequencies of the different types of alerters (but excluding again the non-analysable cases) does show a statistically significant difference according to the mother tongue of the participants (two-tailed; p=.0002659302). However, given the low frequency of some types, these results should be treated with caution.

### Table 6 Number of alerters in the L1 and L2 Discourse Completion Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alerters</th>
<th>L1 speakers</th>
<th>L2 speakers (L1 French)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presence of alerters</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of alerters</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total requests</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 7 Alerters in the L1 and L2 Discourse Completion Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alerters</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>L2 (L1 French)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention getter</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greeting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocative</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination of alerters</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total alerters</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interestingly, the most frequent alerter in both groups is the excuse or apology, counting 194 cases, 83 in the Spanish L1 corpus and 111 in the Spanish L2 corpus. These results also contrast with the absence of apologies in the N1s, where the only alerter present is the attention getter. In addition to the frequencies already commented, some requests combine several alerters (see “combination of alerters” shown in Table 7), which adds 38 more cases to the category of apologies, typically combined with a vocative, as can be seen in example (6).

(6) **Lo siento señor** pero no tengo mi bolígrafo conmigo para firmar estas páginas

¿Podría prestarme el suyo? (COPINE_DCT_048_FF)

*I'm sorry sir* but I don't have my pen with me to sign these pages. Could you lend me yours?

As mentioned (see Section 2.3), excuses or apologies count as a means of mitigating the request, because they reduce the degree of imposition and its requestive force. In Graph 1, the different types of apologies used in the DCT requests have different frequencies depending on the groups.

Other alerters are more frequently found in a specific group. This is the case of attention getters, which are almost exclusively produced by L1 speakers (18 L1 cases, vs. 1 L2). This low frequency is in contrast with what we observed in the N1, where a much higher number of attention getters is produced by each group of participants.
In the DCT, some alerters (in this case, apologies) appear more frequently in the Spanish L2 corpus than in the L1 corpus. For instance, *lo siento* ‘I’m sorry’ is produced more by French-speaking learners of Spanish than by Spaniards.

Other common alerters in the DCT are *perdona* ‘sorry’ and its V-form equivalent *perdone* ‘sorry’, with about 35 occurrences each. The former (with *tú*) is more predominant in the L2 group, whereas the latter (with a V-form) is preferred by the L1 group and barely occurs in the L2 one. This result should, however, not lead to conclude that French-speaking learners address their professors more often with a V-form than Spanish speakers. Indeed, some L2 requests begin with an excuse using the T-form (*perdona*) and continue with a head act that contains a V-form, such as in (7) and (8).

(7) **Perdona, ¿podría darme otra copia?** (COPINE DCT_016_FE)
    *Sorry, could you* give me another copy?

(8) **Perdona, ¿usted tiene un boli?** (COPINE DCT_013_FF)
    *Excuse-me, do you have a pen?*

T/V alternation is found in both groups, although considerably more in the L2 corpus (29 occurrences) than in the L1 corpus (2 occurrences). For L1 participants, occurrences such as in (7), should be interpreted as an oversight. In the case of French-speaking learners of Spanish, however, the T-form in the apology does not seem to reflect absent-mindedness, because those speakers most probably intended to address the professor with the V-form, which is the standard form of address for a professor in their L1 context. This idea is reinforced by the fact that example (8) alternates *perdona* (in the second person singular) with the V-pronoun *usted* in the request head act, which suggests that the French-speaking student knew they needed to address the professor with the V-form. Instead, this phenomenon should be explained in terms of the internalisation and/or fossilisation (Selinker, 1972) of a ready-made formulation (see Marsily, 2022: 288). Indeed, we think that few students realise that the apology (by means of *perdonar*, or *disculpar*) has to be conjugated in the person to whom it is addressed. Another possible explanation is that L2 learners do not know the correct conjugation nor use of the imperative.

Another apology used by the informants at the beginning of their requests is *perdón*, with 17 occurrences in the L1 and 10 in the L2 DCT. This resource is halfway between an apology and an attention getter. We analysed it as an apology, because of the etymological root of *perdonar*.

The verb *disculpar* ‘to excuse’ is also found quite often (21 FR, 19 ES), albeit it clearly comes after *perdonar* ‘to excuse’ (28 FR and 46 ES). Although L1 and L2
speakers in the corpus use about the same amount of strategies with *disculpar*, the Spanish speakers choose the V-variant more often, *disculpe* (15 cases vs. 8 L2 speakers), while French-speaking learners of Spanish opt for *disculpa*, in the T-form (13 L2 vs. 4 L1 speakers). Apologies with *disculpe/disculpa* work similarly as *perdone/perdona*. L1 students tend to opt for the V-form, whereas L2 students generally prefer the T-form, though exceptions exist. The main reason why the T-form is more extended among L2 requests has to do with the alternation cases that we discussed above. In fact, numerous answers to the DCT are formulated in the V-form but contain a T-form in the apology.

Let us now turn to the use of apologies with a pronominal form, such as *perdóname, discúlpeme* and *discúlpame*. These three alerters are found only in the corpus of L2 speakers, in rather low frequencies. However, the fact that they are not used by any L1 Spanish speaker points to their misuse originating in a French calque. In French it is necessary to use a pronominal version of the verb to apologise; *excuse-moi, excusez-moi*. Such pronominal versions exist in Spanish, but rather to apologise, not necessarily to capture attention or to introduce requests. Thus, although the same form exists in Spanish, it does not have the same meaning, especially when it is used to capture attention and to introduce a request.

A look at the situational variable, displayed in Table 8, shows that alerters are generally more frequent in situation 3 (copy), although L1 situation 4 (asking to repeat an utterance that the informant could not understand) yields far more apologies than the other two situations. The reason for the students to use more apologies, which are the alerters that (most) mitigate a request in our corpus, can be explained by the fact that they perceive those requests as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>L2 (L1 French)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention getter</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greeting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocative</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Frequency of use of alerters in the L1 and L2 DCT, per situation.
higher threatening acts, following Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory. Indeed, these requests imply a failure by the teacher (in the case of the illegible copy) or the student (in the case of asking to repeat). By using an alerter in those situations, the students want to express that they are sorry for the inconvenience of the request.

The most frequent alerter, the apology, appears more often in situation 4 (repeat), although in slightly different proportions depending on the group of informants: 36 by L1 and 39 by L2 speakers. Situation 2 (pen) is the one where the fewest apologies are found (21 by L1 and 34 by L2 speakers). Situation 3 (copy) has frequencies of use of apologies in-between situations 2 and 4; 26 by L1 and 38 by L2 speakers are found.

In the following examples, we illustrate different uses of some of the mitigators observed in the DCTs. Example (9) concerns the use of *perdono* with the V-form in the head act of a request by an L1 speaker. In (10) the request, again produced by an L1 speaker, is formulated in the T-form and is initiated with the apology *perdona*. They both function as a way of getting the interlocutor’s attention and as a way of apologising for the inconvenience.

(9)  *Perdono* pero no le he escuchado bien, ¿puede repetirme la última parte, por favor? (COPINE_DCT_026_FE)
   I’m sorry but I didn’t hear you properly, could you repeat the last part, please?

(10) *Perdona*, ¿podrías repetírmelo? No he entendido lo que me decías con el ruido del estornudo. (COPINE_DCT_032_FE)
   Sorry, could you repeat that? I didn’t understand what you were saying with the sneezing noise.

Another variant of *perdono/perdona* in the DCT is *perdón*, which is used by both groups of participants, e.g., in (11) to get the hearer’s attention, before justifying the reason for formulating the request. In the L2 example (12), however, the student pronounces the alerter by means of a question *¿perdón?*, as if to ask for permission to interrupt the other in his activity.

(11) *Perdón*, es que mi folio está lleno de café y no consigo leer bien lo que pone. ¿Le importaría darme otra copia? (Gracias) (COPINE_DCT_018_FE)
   I’m sorry, but my handout is full of coffee and I can’t read what it says, would you mind giving me another copy? (Thank you)
(12) ¿Perdón? No puedo leer mi copia. ¿Sería posible tener una otra, por favor? (COPINE_DCT_010_FF)
    Sorry? I can’t read my copy, could I have another copy please.

Other two categories of alerters in the DCT are attention getters and vocatives. Example (13) illustrates L1 production of the former, whereas (14) and (15) are L1 and L2 examples of the latter, respectively.

(13) Ay, me olvidé el bolígrafo. ¿Podría prestarme uno? (COPINE_DCT_066_ME)
    Oh, I forgot my pen, could I borrow one?

(14) Profesor, mi examen está manchado, ¿me das otro? (COPINE_DCT_033_FE)
    Professor, my exam is stained, could you give me another one?

(15) ¿Señor, puede repetir lo que justo me ha dicho. Es que mi compañero ha estornudado y no me ha quedado claro su respuesta. (COPINE_DCT_053_MF)
    Sir, could you repeat what you just said to me. My colleague sneezed and I was unclear about your answer.

As mentioned, attention getters are far less present in the DCT corpus and are almost inexistent in the L2 corpus. In order to catch the attention of the hearer, Spanish L1 students recur to different markers, e.g., ay (as in example (13)), uy, eh, which are three alternatives to the English ‘oh’, or discursive markers oiga ‘listen’, mire ‘look’ or por favor ‘please’. Those terms are also found in the N1. It is important to point that the N1 and DCT differ in production mode, which has a consequence on the frequencies of usage of the retrieved alerters. As described in Marsily (2022: 289), native students have acquired formal structures that they consider appropriate in requests. They use these in the DCT (including apologies and discursive markers), but not in the spoken N1 (which nevertheless also represent a relatively formal setting). The fact that attention getters such as ah, oh or eh are more related to spoken language, may thus explain their absence in the DCT.

As far as vocatives are concerned, they are not very prevalent in the L2 corpus. The biggest difference lies in the choice of terms to refer to the professor. All the L1 speakers refer to the professor by means of Profesor ‘Professor’,
whereas the L2 vacillate between Señor ‘Sir’ and Profesor ‘Professor’, the majority using Señor, which reflects negative transfer from the French term that is used in the French-speaking academic context. Indeed, whereas in Spain, students usually call their professors by their title or by their first name in case of closer relationships, in the French-speaking part of Belgium, only Monsieur ‘Sir’ or Madame ‘Madam’ is used in the same context, not the first name nor the title.

As shown, the results obtained from the NI and DCT differ in two respects. First, a much higher proportion of the requests in the DCT includes an alerter. Second, as far as the diversity of alerters is concerned, all NI participants preferred attention getters, which is moreover the only type of alerter found in the NI. In the DCT, however, we observe a much more varied use of alerters. The participants also use attention getters but their preferred alerter is the apology. Moreover, they also started their requests by means of greetings, vocatives, or a combination of at least two of the aforementioned devices. Those results confirm that the type of methodology is key in the corpus collection and subsequently obtained data.

4.3 Naturalised Interactions vs. Discourse Completion Tests
The design of our own methodological device and the analysis of our data through two different types of corpus highlight notable differences between the datasets with respect to the production of requests, the use of mitigation and especially, for this study, the use of alerters. Indeed, the answers generated by the DCT are shaped by the metapragmatic awareness of the participants and appear to be more conventionalised, while the requests of the NIs were more varied and closer to spontaneous conversation, which corresponds to Tran’s (2006) findings. This allows us to reassess some of the existing data collection methodologies. As has been extensively developed in Marsily (2022: 388), the DCT “describes situations of use to which participants respond in a conventional way according to the type of context, without taking into account other factors typical of real conversations, such as communicative immediacy or the shared context of the speakers” (our translation). The NI appears to be closer to real conversations and therefore also fosters much more spontaneous speech than the DCT. The results of our study then stress the importance of the method of data collection. When properly set, the DCT offers interesting interactional insights, especially when used in a multi-method approach (House and Kádár, 2021; 2023). In this sense, the triangulation of methods allows for a more complete analysis (Marsily, 2022: 388).
Conclusions

In this article, we have focused on the use of alerters in requests formulated by L1 speakers of Peninsular Spanish and French-speaking students of Spanish as an L2 to a professor, through an analysis based on data from Naturalised Interactions and Discourse Completion Tests.

We have shown that the different methods used to obtain the data yield very different results as to the use of alerters. In the N1S, the vast majority of requests do not contain any alerter and, if they do, it is an attention getter. In the DCTs, however, requests contain alerters much more frequently and they are of a much more varied nature, with the apology being by far the most frequent one, though attention getters are also used. This very different result may be due to the fact that, when filling out a DCT, the student does not know whether he or she already has the attention of the professor. In the N1S, however, the interaction has already been initiated (a greeting has for instance already been uttered at the start of the interaction). While the overall lower frequency of alerters in the N1S can then be explained by the different contexts in which the request is produced, this does not explain that a different type of alerter is dominant in each data collection method. Indeed, the overwhelming presence of apologies in the DCTs points to a way of formulating the request that corresponds perhaps more to what is being taught and to societal expectations on how to formulate a request to a professor. Yet, we see that both L1 and L2 speakers do not use apologies at all in the N1S, where they opt for much less elaborate alerters, many of which pertain clearly to the realm of spoken language. This raises the question whether the higher presence of apologies in the DCT is also related to the written nature of the DCT. An alternative test would be to organise an oral DCT, where students would be asked to record their answers to stimuli.

Overall, the fact that different methods yield such different results opens up important avenues for future research in the field of (contrastive) pragmatics. Indeed, many studies (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989; Sampedro Mella, 2020 among others), especially on situations where it is difficult to obtain natural data, have based their analyses on DCT. Our results suggest that it is important to consider methods such as the N1, which allow for obtaining more naturalistic data.

With respect to the contrast between Spanish by L1 speakers of peninsular Spanish and French-speaking students of Spanish as L2, we do not identify statistically significant differences between French and Spanish as to the presence or absence of alerters in the DCT and the N1. However, our data reveal
differences as to which types of alerters are used as alerters. These results are statistically significant, but they should be interpreted with caution, given the low frequencies of some types. Moreover, we observe some differences between the NI and DCT results. For both groups, the attention getters are the most frequently used alerter in the NI, whereas in the DCT the apologies dominate. In the NI we see that French-speaking learners of Spanish partially use French alerters. In the DCT data, French-speaking learners of Spanish use some apologies such as *lo siento* or *perdóname, perdóneme*, which point to the different structure of such apologies used as alerters in French and Spanish, calquing French *je suis désolé·e* ‘I’m sorry’ or *Excusez-moi* ‘(please) excuse me’. Moreover, the use of *perdón* in an interrogative way reflects the specificity of French *pardon*? as an apology that alerts and at the same time seems to ask permission to interrupt the hearer.

These results open up important routes for teaching Spanish to French-speaking students, but also for translation and interpreting between the two languages, as well as for intercultural communication between speakers of the two languages. On the one hand, the almost exclusive presence of attention getters in naturalistic data versus the DCT shows that this is not the expected alerter produced by speakers when they are in a setting of specific reflection concerning request formulation as is the DCT. As such, these attention getters might be considered inadequate when speakers actively reflect on their request formulation, even though they tend to use them spontaneously. On the other hand, the differences in form and use of the apologies between French-speaking and Spanish speakers could equally lead to misunderstandings or to misjudgements concerning the interlocutor’s attention, especially in the context of the face-threatening act that a request is in most cases. Thus, while French and Spanish are closely related languages and while overall tendencies concerning the use of alerters in requests are relatively similar, some subtle differences can be observed between French-speaking vs. L1 speakers of Spanish, which can be partly related to the impact of the L1 French. These differences moreover demonstrate that the contrastive study of the pragmatics of two closely related languages is also of great relevance.

Regarding limitations, our study focuses on a specific type of interactional context, and reports on the results of speakers of two specific geographic varieties. We do not aim to generalise the results obtained here to other geographic varieties of French and Spanish. However, we do believe that this study highlights that a more detailed study of requests, including an analysis of alerters, can be highly relevant to the comparison between (varieties of) languages.
References


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**Biographical Notes**

Aurélie Marsily holds a PhD in linguistics from UCLouvain. Her research focusses on the production and the perception of requests in Spanish and Spanish spoken by French-speakers. She compiled the COPINE corpus in 2017, gathering requests from Spanish L1 speakers and French-speaking learners of Spanish. Her work concerns the study of the request head act, address terms and mitigation. It integrates the field of pragmatics and is analysed from a contrastive perspective. She authored several articles, among others, *La conciencia pragmática de los estudiantes nativos y no nativos del español: El caso de las peticiones hacia profesores* (2022).

Barbara De Cock holds a PhD in linguistics from KULeuven and is professor of Spanish linguistics at the Université catholique de Louvain. Her research concerns different fields of pragmatics and discourse analysis, among others the use of person reference and depersonalising strategies. She is the author of *Profiling Discourse Participants. Forms and functions in Spanish conversation and debates* (2014). Part of her work is carried out from a contrastive perspective and/or involves comparing L1 speakers of Spanish with speakers of Spanish as a foreign language. She is also involved in the teacher training of Spanish as a foreign language to French-speaking students.