

Metamorphoses of a quantifier and a comparative standard marker into modality: modal uses of Spanish *un poco* and *como* in conversation

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Speakers of Spanish dispose of a quantifier for non-countable nouns to indicate a small portion or something below a norm or expectation, *un poco* (English ‘a bit’, ‘some’, 1a). Additionally, *un poco* functions as a modifier of the degree (1b) and frequency (1c) of predicates. Semantically, *un poco* is expected to modify gradable predicates, while syntactically, it typically appears post-verbally.

- (1) a. Necesito **un poco** de vino
I need some wine
b. Estoy **un poco** cansado
I’m a little tired
c. Hablamos *un poco*
We talked a little

However, in conversational Spanish, *un poco* often appears in unexpected contexts, often leading to logical contradictions or violations of typical syntactic constraints:

- (2) a. es todavía como **un poco** *pueblo* [BARC.M13.001, 53]¹
it is still like a little (bit) of a village.
b. es **un poco** *horrible* [BARC.M13.001, 31]
it is a little (bit) *horrible*
c. es **un poco** *andaluza* [BARC.M23.016, 255]
she is a little (bit) *andaluza*
d. lo que nos quieren **un poco** *vender* es que saldremos beneficiados
what they want to sell us a little (bit) is that we will benefit

Another element that defies expectations in spoken language is *como* (English ‘as’, ‘like’), which traditionally serves as a relative pronoun used in equative (3a) and similitive (3b) constructions (Haspelmath & Buchholz 1998) to mark the standard against which a comparison takes place.

- (3) a. Es (tan) humano **como** todos
He is (as) human as everyone else.
b. Hablaba **como** una niña
She spoke like a child.

In conversation, *como* can also be found in unexpected contexts. In similitive (non-copulative) constructions *como* can introduce different syntactic functions and not just modifiers of manner (4a–b). In equative (copulative) constructions, the use of *como* most often comes with the lack of some constituents of the comparison paradigm. In the later case, the comparative construction may be interpreted as a non-comparative copulative construction which, like with *un poco*, can result in logical contradictions when, for example, *como* modifies the degree of relational adjectives (4c).

¹Examples are extracted from the corpus PRESSEA (2014–)

- (4) a. hay **como** *una identidad de pueblo*
 there is like *an identity of town*
 b. ¿**cómo** cuántas habitaciones hay?
 like how many rooms are there?
 c. era **como** burguesa
 was like (a) bourgeois

[BARC_M22.050]

In this talk, I will discuss “ungrammatical” or unexpected contexts where *un poco* and *como* are used in conversation. I will argue that these contexts trigger modal interpretations of both particles. Drawing on sociolinguistic interviews from PRESSEA (2014–), I will analyse the functional, semantic, and syntactic factors that shape the modal or “non-grammatical” uses of *como* and *un poco* in spoken language. Specifically, I will examine the modified syntactic functions, the semantic type of the modified category, and the syntactic position of the modified verb. The working hypothesis is that structural innovation with both particles and semantic contradiction generate modal implicatures by modifying the illocutionary force of the speech act (Brown & Levinson 1987).

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