

BLOQUE 1.
MECANISMOS DE ATENUACIÓN
EN EL DISCURSO: DESCRIPCIÓN Y
FUNCIONAMIENTO

MITIGATION VIA EXEMPLIFICATION IN PRESENT-DAY ITALIAN: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY*

LA ATENUACIÓN A TRAVÉS DE LA EJEMPLIFICACIÓN EN ITALIANO ACTUAL: UN ESTUDIO BASADO EN CORPUS

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Resumen

El artículo se refiere a las funciones pragmáticas de la ejemplificación en Italia, centrándose en una serie de construcciones como *non so* (esp. *no sé*) y *tipo* (esp. *como*). Basándonos en el estudio de tres corpus lingüísticos, podemos hipotetizar que tales construcciones son formalmente heterogéneas. Sin embargo, todas se emplean para expresar atenuación. De hecho, estas se podrían concebir como procedimientos para conceptualizar actos pragmáticos con distinta fuerza ilocutiva, o sea como ejemplos de una amplia serie que tiene el fin de no imponer ni debilitar la carga de compromiso del hablante.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ejemplificación, atenuación, categorización, cortesía, conversación.

Abstract

The paper addresses the pragmatic functions of exemplification in Italian by focusing on a set of exemplifying constructions such as *non so* (Eng. 'I don't know') and *tipo* (Eng. 'like'). Based on a corpus-based study, we may hypothesise that such constructions may be formally heterogeneous but all of them are employed to express mitigation. Indeed, they may be conceived as procedural tools to conceptualise pragmatic acts with different illocutionary force as examples of a wider set in order not to impose or to weaken the burden of speaker's commitment.

KEY WORDS: exemplification, mitigation, categorisation, politeness, conversation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Aims of the paper: pragmatic functions of exemplification

This contribution focuses on the pragmatic functions of exemplification in Italian. The discussion will be based on data from three corpora of present-day Italian. This survey does not aim to be either exhaustive or complete, but its goal is to analyse systematically a pool of exemplifying constructions (henceforth ECs), which are employed to construct or to fine-tune meaning in discourse in order to manage interactional notions such as face and power, thus ultimately functioning as mitigation devices (Brown and Levinson 1987). Exemplification is primarily claimed to be employed to convey a function of specification and clarification; it is defined as a universal strategy of selection of entities, properties, and situations as examples, that is to say, as particular instances among real (or potential) sets to aid the hearer in the process of interpretation. The function of exemplification is indeed employed to help the hearer in her interpretative task; such a task would be the comprehension of a given presumably vague statement, the concrete realisation of a request or of a suggestion, the answer to an overt or covert question and so on (Manzotti 1998: 108). Consider the following examples (1-2):

- (1) *Ho letto dei giornali tipo Il Corriere della sera o Repubblica [...] Corriere della sera or Repubblica* 'I read some newspapers like Il Corriere della sera or Repubblica [...]' (Lip Corpus)
- (2) *Sarebbe un'ottima cosa se stabilissimo [...] una suddivisione dei compiti, tipo che uno si prende la croce della rassegna stampa un altro segue i sindacati etc.* 'It would be perfect if we established [...] a subdivision of the tasks, like that one takes up the press review stuff, another (of us) the trades union, and so on' (Lip Corpus)

In (1), we are faced with a process of interpretation, which is based on exemplification. The speaker aims at tailoring the category borders of *newspapers* near the most salient exemplars, that is, *Corriere della sera* and *Repubblica*: the hearer has to process the label meaning starting from such accessible, concrete members, as selected by the speaker. In (2), the aim is both to provide a clarification of a given concept, namely *una suddivisione dei compiti* (Eng. 'a subdivision of the tasks'), and to provide a suggestion without imposing. In other words, the speaker provides the hearer with a *possible* alternative to solve a given problem. The ECs under examination (*tipo che*, Eng. 'type/kind that') could be compared to the set of discourse markers playing a *cognitive* function of modulation (see the classification of discourse markers into cognitive, interpersonal and metatextual markers, as proposed by Bazzaella 2006).

As Manzotti (1998) points out, exemplification plays a set of multifaceted functions ranging from discursive functions with scope over texts to pragmatic functions of mitigation with scope over the illocutionary force of speech acts (Molinelli 2016). The latter set of functions is clearly recognized in the work of Caffi (2007). Indeed, in her comprehensive survey on mitigation, Caffi (2007: 198-250) also defines exemplification as a strategy of mitigation (cf. the notion of *lenitive mitigation* or the notion of exemplification as *reticence*), as in the following example from the Coris Corpus:

| | | | | |
|--|-------------------|----------------|----------------------------|---------------|
| (3) <i>preferisco</i> | <i>ovviamente</i> | <i>salire,</i> | <i>che so?, diciamo</i> | <i>sabato</i> |
| prefer.1SG | obviously | go:INF | che so say.SUBJ.1PL | Saturday |
| 'I would prefer to come, what do I know? let's say on Saturday' | | | | |

(Coris Corpus)

In such an example, the speaker does not want to commit herself to the proposal she is uttering in form of example. Indeed, as suggested by Erman (2001: 1341), linguistic strategies of vague categorisation (such as ECs) may play a face-saving function, that is a mitigation function pertaining to speakers' social faces.

Some studies have analysed both the textual and pragmatic functions of some ECs in Italian: particularly, according to Conte (1988), the Italian ECs *ad esempio* (Eng. 'for example'), *poniamo* (Eng. 'let us take'), *facciamo* (Eng. 'let us make') and *diciamo* (Eng. 'let us say') are specific instances of the co-called *pragmatic adverbs*; in other words, their function is to qualify sections of texts by describing that the argumentation is based on a process of exemplification. Interestingly, Andorno (2005), for example, analyses *diciamo* and points out the semantic link between the function of exemplification and that of mitigation, thus underlying not only the textual implications, but also one of the pragmatic functions of the marker under examination; Schneider (2007) focuses on a set of parentheticals with mitigating functions (cf. *non so, penso* Eng. 'I don't know', 'I think'), arguing that exemplification may be a road to mitigation. Voghera (2012, 2013a, 2013b) analyses the pragmatic functions of the taxonomic noun *tipo*, which may acquire exemplifying functions too, in addition to other textual and pragmatic functions (such as focalisation). However, although there is a considerable amount of literature on the topic in general, not all the markers under examination have been exhaustively treated in terms of ECs conveying a meaning of mitigation *via* exemplification. Consequently, we attempt to describe such markers thoroughly as a systematic pool of mitigation devices, i.e., as linguistic strategies reducing speaker's commitment (Fraser 2010), in a perspective that seriously takes into account the role of categorisation played by exemplification and the role of the latter in the encoding of pragmatic functions of mitigation. Thus, summarizing, our main purpose is:

- 1) to introduce a notion of categorization conveyed by exemplification; and from there
- 2) to comprehensively study the pragmatic functions of ECs in serving mitigation in conversation.

1.1.1. *Exemplification and mitigation: some premises on the role of alternatives*

Exemplification lends particularly well to express mitigation within specific speech acts whose focus is to elicit some sort of knowledge or the realisation of an action; ad-

ditionally, it might be employed to utter assertive speech acts as examples: the speaker conceptualises the propositional content (or a portion of it) of such a speech act as an example of a more general category.

Indeed, ECs may function as tools to guide the interlocutor through a process of comprehension based on exemplification; the hearer has to consider the expressed examples as triggers to think of further related examples, which are contextually active (Voghera 2012). The final goal is to build a locally-relevant category comprising both the mentioned examples and the inferred ones; in case of some pragmatic functions, it is at level of such a category that speakers are asked to select an alternative and opt for its concrete realisation starting from a set consisting of a paradigm of equipollent possibilities (Caffi 2007: 238).

In other words, the speaker utters a specific speech as if it were an example for purposes of politeness, which is to say that she suggests more than one alternative to provide the interlocutor with the freedom to make her own choice, without imposing; thus, as we will see, such a strategy is not directly aimed to categorization (Caffi 2007: 234).

1.1.2. *The data: ECs in Italian*

Concerning the data, this study takes into account the following markers: *non so*, *che so*, *che ne so* (Eng. ‘I don’t know’, ‘what do I know’, ‘what do I know about it’), *per dire* (Eng. ‘just to say’), *magari* (Eng. ‘maybe’), *per esempio*, *ad esempio* (Eng. ‘for instance’), *tipo* (Eng. ‘like’), *mettiamo* and *poniamo* (Eng. ‘let’s suppose’). Given the varying syntactic source of the markers, there are plenty of tags: some markers are generally treated as parentheticals or comment clauses recalling their function of devices that allow speakers to comment on their discourse or to express their points of view (Schneider 2007), sometimes they are defined as discourse markers pertaining to the structuring of texts as wholes, and so on. Consequently, each of these tags captures a different textual, pragmatic or syntactic feature. Despite such a formal variation, in exemplificative contexts, ECs share properties on syntactic and (sometimes) prosodic grounds (Kaltenböck *et alii* 2011) and encode a clearly procedural meaning, because they provide hearers with instructions on how to interpret and embed the content they receive, when they have to process texts based on exemplification mechanisms. The meaning of a linguistic expression is *procedural* if it constrains the inferential phase of comprehension by indicating the kind of inference processes that are expected to be drawn in order to satisfy the speaker’s expectation of relevance during the process of comprehension (Wilson and Sperber 1993). In particular, Blakemore (1987) analysed a variety of discourse connectives in procedural terms. Some expressions such as *after all*, *so*, and *but* are indeed procedural, namely they do not encode concepts, and do not contribute to the truth value of an utterance; they rather indicate how to conduct an inferential process. Their being procedural makes ECs especially interesting with respect to the role played by (extra)linguistic context in determining and guiding interpretative processes, which are based on shared knowledge (Mauri and Sansò 2017).

Additionally, ECs are claimed to show an interesting trend in linguistic change from text to (con)text, namely from textual functions to intersubjective and pragmatic functions (Traugott and Dasher 2002). The main questions at issue in this research are whether there are recurrent patterns or restrictions in the linguistic items that can be selected for exempli-

fication and what morphosyntactic and semantic properties could trigger the development of the exemplification function from varying linguistic sources. In other words, how is it possible that such diverse sources can ultimately convey the same exemplifying function for pragmatic purposes? Can we detect linguistic clues yielding the function of mitigation via exemplification?

A final remark is worth being made: despite the formal variety of the markers under examination, they all share a general mechanism, namely the selection of contextually-active examples (Voghera 2012: 354). The study seeks to illustrate that exemplification is an embedded process, based on the shared knowledge between interlocutors. Such a process can be employed to construct meaning on the basis of explicit members, which are retrieved in a shared context. One can think that the internal denotation of the resulting category could be vague or imprecise to a certain extent (given that the process requires analogy and abstraction over mentioned examples (Mauri 2014)). Notwithstanding, it will be argued that we can reconsider vagueness linked to exemplification in terms of context-dependence (see Voghera 2012, 2013a, 2013b for some insights on the question of the selection of examples to build a context-based category on the basis of the similarity between the examples). Context-dependence itself will be discussed with reference to its economic properties, showing that exemplification is frequently employed to communicate semantic and pragmatic meaning on the basis of active examples without consuming energies in retrieving or in creating rigorous linguistic tags during on-line communication, especially when the focus is mitigation via categorization rather than an ordinary classificatory need (cf. Section 2.1).

1.2. Overview

The paper is structured as follows: in section 2.1 the notion of exemplification is contextualised in the current literature, trying to find a definition to be pursued in the whole work. We intend to underline that our focus is trying to fill a gap in this research domain, enriching the textual considerations with conceptual and interactional insights, crucially based on the role of set construction in the rise of pragmatic functions. Exemplification is an operation which activates the construction of a class, the example is an alternative on a par with the other ones of the same class. The set is indeed made up a list of examples which may be considered equivalent alternatives of a more general concept or category (see the notion of exemplification as a strategy of expression of equipollent possibilities in the case of assertives (Caffi 2007: 238)). Such an operation of set construction may be crucial in the encoding of pragmatic functions, as it will be clearer in the following sections.

We intend to illustrate the premises of our work by focusing on a specific perspective to categorization, namely on-line categorisation via exemplification. It is claimed to be the key notion to comprehend the role of exemplification as categorization device to play contextually-relevant pragmatic functions. Put differently, the consideration will be related to the kind of exemplification we are interested in, namely pragmatically-motivated exemplification; then some considerations on the sample of data and on the parameters are made in 2.2 and 2.3. Section 3 provides a general synchronic picture of the ECs under examination, outlining the morphosyntactic and the distributional features of each construction; section 4 offers the central analysis of the pragmatic functions of mitigation; more specifi-

cally, we will present different examples connected to the explicitness of the speech act; the syntactic level of example (phrase or sentence); and employment of more or less typical or transparent markers; finally, section 5 contains preliminary remarks and prospects for future research. Before moving on some methodological remarks, let us provide a sketch of some of the expectations we had before conducting the analysis. We expected some structural patterns based on purely semantic grounds, e.g. some markers to have scope over phrases instead of sentences (such as *ad esempio* and *per esempio*, given the fact that they comprise the lexical item *esempio*); then, some functional regularities concerning the co-occurrence between some markers and some functions (regarding lexicalised markers such as *per esempio/ad esempio*, or approximators such as *tipo*¹, they are normally not expected to take over a considerable amount of pragmatic functions on the basis of exemplification, given their transparent semantics of clarification), and so on. Quantitative and qualitative evidence supported some of these expectations. Other new intuitions emerged during the corpus-based analysis. Maybe the most important finding is the widespread frequency of *irrealis* syntactic environments in which ECs occur when conveying pragmatic functions; we will describe these unexpected findings in the final section of this work. As it will become clearer throughout the discussion, we will tackle the following crucial questions: i) how could exemplification develop into mitigation? ii) what is the role of set construction and of alternatives? iii) should we hypothesize the rise of a shift from textual to contextual and interactional level? iv) might exemplification develop into epistemic modalisation or, at least, into a device of epistemic stance modelling? v) which features could trigger such a functional shift?

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PREMISES

2.1. Towards a definition of exemplification

In addition to the classical definition of exemplification as a means of clarification of a previously mentioned unit –or category– (see Hyland 2007: 270 *inter alia*), we aim at illustrating the crucial notion of categorisation *via* exemplification and the pragmatic functions the latter may cover in categorising. In doing so, we will consider the approach pursued by Mauri (2017) to exemplification in her work on the process *ad hoc* categories building and interpretation; we will indeed argue that exemplification is a pragmatic and intersubjective phenomenon in nature, in that the examples are retrieved in a context where they are relevant for the speaker to reach a given conversational task. Indeed, we intend to consider exemplification not only as an illustrative process of meaning clarification (see Hyland 2007 *inter alia*), but as a process bearing a pragmatic reality (see Caffi 2007), which is not only the meaning clarification: examples may also occur without a previous category they clarify. In some cases of exemplification, the hearer is indeed asked to construct a category on the basis of the overtly mentioned exemplars, which trigger a process of abstraction. Such a process leads to the building of the final, abstract category (which may be covert and, consequently, not previously mentioned). Put differ-

¹ For a detailed study on the textual and pragmatic functions of *tipo*, see the works by Voghera (2012, 2013a, 2013b).

ently, such category is built based on the expressed, contextually-active examples. Indeed, as Mauri (2017) points out, categories may be built with varying functions in discourse; that is to say, they may refer to a category lacking a linguistic tag, or they may refer to a category having such a tag, which is considered too imprecise for current purposes, as in the following example:

- (4) *Beveva sempre e soltanto, che so, cola o soda.*
 drink:IMPF.3SG always and only **che so** coke or soda
 ‘(S)he drank only ever, **what do I know**, coke or soda’

(Coris Corpus)

Even if the language provides the category label *soda drinks*, speakers may decide to on-line build such a category, that is on the basis of the salient, contextually active examples; the final result is to anchor the process of interpretation to the context (Mauri 2017). This notion of context-anchoring seems very crucial in the case of pragmatic functions played by ECs, namely typical devices of set construction: when a speaker intends to utter a speech act aiming at eliciting some sort of knowledge, she might use an example (or a list of examples) in order to make clearer the relevant semantic space on the basis of a real-occurring instance, which is on-line retrieved in the shared context. The example can have such a crucial role because the speaker is interested in eliciting some form of information similar to the specific example and provides other clues only to preserve the freedom and the face of the interlocutor; the final aim is to facilitate her conversational task. Given the classical definition of example as an alternative among diverse possible ones (cf. Manzotti 1998), this strategy preserves from the threatening impact of specific speech acts, precisely referring to a real or a potential wider set comprising both the mentioned example and further, analogical alternatives, as in (5):

- (5) We could go, I don't know, to the cinema (whatsapp conversation)

In (5), the speaker invites the interlocutor to construct the category of *things we could do in the afternoon*, comprising alternatives which are similar to the expressed example *to go the cinema*, which is very active in the speech situation, and very similar to the idea of activities the speaker wants to perform. In a such a situation, employing a category label would be vague and imprecise, so 1) the speaker utters the example to have an idea of the specific activities to perform and, more crucially, 2) the hearer could opt for another alternative, which is similar to the expressed one. This notion of similarity is properly triggered by the process of exemplification, which implies the reference to a set of alternatives. Given that the alternative is given as a non-categorical example of a wider list, the hearer feels not imposed upon. Such a process of categorization presupposes and, at the same time, construes a common ground between interlocutors: it is within such a common level of sense that examples can be considered active and easy-conceivable for more complex processes, such as linguistic attenuation, which may be employed to not impose, as in (5). In other words, exemplification expresses a lack of commitment to the speech act the speaker is performing (Fraser 2010: 22) and, at the same time, it provides the hearer with clues (the examples) on how a general category is to be processed. However, the real

reason to exemplify is that examples are contextually more relevant of category, given that the speaker is interested in performing a given, concrete activity, which is similar to the example *to go to the cinema*.

Furthermore, in cases of assertive speech acts, the speaker protects her face by expressing considerations, statements, and suggestions as they were potential examples among a set of equipollent alternatives (*I think for example that/I suppose for instance that*). The end is to reduce her burden of responsibility, whereby conveying a fact of epistemic stance.

So, there is some ground for assuming the crucial role of exemplification as a road to attenuation. Before moving to the discussion of some representative instances of such a rationale, we will succinctly describe the data and the parameters of analysis.

2.2. The data

The considerations we are going to discuss are the result of a corpus-based, empirical study (Freddi 2014: 33). Particularly, we select three corpora, in order to compare different domains: Coris (written Italian), Lip (spoken Italian), and Nunc (speech-like written Italian). We apply such a methodology because it may be a useful means of identifying the varying exemplification functions without imposing pre-empirical intuitions to the data. In addition, given that there are currently no systematic studies of the complete set of ECs under examination, we could not have relied on analytical tools or previous labels. Each label is, in a way, corpus-based.

2.2.1. The Lip Corpus

The Lip Corpus (*Lessico di frequenza dell'italiano parlato*) is a collection of texts in spoken Italian. It was collected in 1990-1992 by a group of linguists directed by Tullio De Mauro. It contains 469 texts, that amount to a total of approximately 490 000 words recorded in Milan, Florence, Rome, and Naples (Voghera et al. 2014). The texts derive from different types of discourse. The Lip corpus can be queried through the website of the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz. It is part of the platform BADIP. This corpus constitutes the starting point of this survey because it contains spoken data; in addition, given the limited amount of data, it functioned as a sort of test bed to investigate the pragmatic markers under examination. The occurrences we analyze amount to 96 concordances.

2.2.2. The Coris Corpus

The Coris Corpus (*Corpus di riferimento dell'italiano scritto*) is a reference corpus of written Italian. It is part of a project that was started in 1998, with the purpose of creating a representative general reference corpus of written Italian (Rossini Favretti 2000). The corpus contains 130 million words and has been updated every three years through a built-in monitor corpus. The project is the result of the research conducted at the University of Bologna. The Coris Corpus has been selected to include the written domain in our sample. Due to the huge amount of data contained in the Coris Corpus, we select random samples for some ECs such as *ad/per esempio*; the analysis is based on 359 occurrences of this corpus.

2.2.3. *The Nunc Corpus*

The Nunc Corpus-italiano generico (*NewsgroupsUseNet Generic Corpus of Italian - Subset I*) is part of a project carried out at the University of Torino, with the intention of collecting a huge amount of data based on the language of newsgroups, i.e. a generic tag for world-wide multi-participant electronic discourse (Barbera 2013); newsgroup members are engaged in topic-oriented discussion, their language represents a borderline variety showing hybrid properties associable to both the speech discourse and to the written language. The corpus has been selected because it contains a considerable amount of data continuously updated (precisely, our analysis is based on the Nunc Generic Italian-subsection 1; it contains 127.708.505 tokens) and to examine the variety of the texts it contains. In the Nunc Corpus, we analyse 459 occurrences taken from random samples, due to the huge amount of data.

2.3. Parameters of analysis

Two sets of parameters are employed: structural and functional.

2.3.1. *Structural parameters*

The former set of parameters comprises morphosyntactic, distributional and textual features of both ECs and of the syntactic environments of exemplification. Concerning syntactic features particularly, we examine whether ECs introduce sentences or phrases. This feature could be a useful means of looking at whether examples can be used to denote complex situations or simple entities. In addition, it is useful to monitor the occurrences of examples in isolation or in lists in order to detect the referential status and the role of such examples. Concerning the morphosyntactic level, we will give a glance to the internal grammatical features of the markers (such as person of the verb, verbal aspect and so on); the distributional parameters are employed to monitor the co-occurrence between ECs and general extenders, as in 15) - *and stuff like that*) or approximators (*like, kind, sort of* (Channell 1994)). In addition, the parameters under examination can unveil the (*ir*)*realis* status of contexts in which ECs occur. Such notion of *irrealis* is studied by monitoring the occurrence of devices such as directives, futures, psychological predicates, epistemic adverbs, occurrence of interrogative or directive speech acts in which ECs may occur (Mauri 2008). The textual parameter is a means of looking at whether in the contexts speakers carry on talking about the topic of exemplification (i.e. category or example) or whether a topic shift occurs. In other words, we look at the parameter of topic continuity (Givón 1983, Andorno 2005). Indeed, pragmatic functions frequently occur in contexts where the category is not expressed properly because it is not likely to be the real focus of the exemplification at hand.

2.3.2. *Functional parameters*

The latter set of parameters takes into account the cognitive and pragmatic functions of exemplification with a special focus on the latter. On the one hand, at the cognitive level, we

distinguish between the on-line construction of locally-relevant categories *in absentia*, i.e. not previously mentioned, and the remodulation of previously mentioned, but presumably vague categories, namely *in praesentia*. The former correspond to categories that are not lodged in memory in the same way as common categories are, because they come into existence for a speaker when needed in actual conversation (Channell 1994: 123). The latter imply a remodulation process aimed at clarifying explicit but presumably vague categories. Indeed, ECs may be used both to point to not mentioned categories or to re-modulate the denotation of previously mentioned, but presumably vague categories; the focus of this strategy is to tailor their internal reference and, consequently, to anchor their interpretation to the speech situation. Sometimes, speakers may have a tag at their disposal, but they indeed prefer to profilate the exact denotation of the category thus stressing the precise items that are part of it (Wilson and Carston 2007). Such process leads to underline the context-dependence of the category interpretation, as in the following example:

- (6) *se avessero* *iniziato* *a fare* *certe cose*
 if have:SUBJ.PST.3PL start:PFV.PTCP to do.INF certain things
(che so, metropolitana, tangenziale, terza corsia, ecc ..) - 30 anni
che so, subway bypass third road lane and so on thirty years
fa adesso ci *sarebbero*
 ago now CLIT.3PL be.COND.3PL
 ‘If they had started to construct certain things (**what do I know**, subway, bypass and third road lane and so on) 30 years ago, now these things would have been there’
 (Nunc Corpus)

In this example, the speaker could have employed the category label *public projects*; actually, she decides to employ the examples to make clearer the exact denotation of the category and to anchor interpretation to the speech situation. As previously mentioned, on-line categorisation indeed consists in the selection of contextually-relevant example to build a category properly on the basis of examples rather than of the category.

On the other hand, ECs may be employed to play pragmatic functions of attenuation. For the sake of this paper, we focus on this set of functions pertaining to face, power and politeness. Politeness is the expression of the speaker’s intention to weaken face threats carried by certain compromising acts toward another speaker. Face is a construct that is emotionally concerned; it can be lost, maintained, or enhanced; it has to be constantly defended (Brown and Levinson 1987: 313). In other words, it is an array of social skills whose goal is to warrant everyone feels affirmed in a social communication. Being polite therefore consists of attempting to save face for another (Brown and Levinson 1987). More specifically, ECs may be used to indirectly (and consequently politely) express attitudes, personal assertions, and evaluations in conversation, thus softening the force of implicit criticisms or the strength of personal considerations. In other circumstances, they may conceptualise a set of speech acts that encode directive situations, that is, when speakers intend to weaken the strength of presumably intrusive speech acts, such as commands, suggestions, requests, and proposals. Such acts are potentially negative face threatening, namely they can compromise the desire of an adult speaker that her actions be unrestrained (Brown and Levinson 1987: 312). Even if an array of different micro-functions can be often determined, however, in this paper the common label *pragmatic*

functions will be employed in all the occurrences where ECs show some attenuation functions, namely cases where the speaker declares a commitment modulation for pragmatic purposes. To study attenuation, we monitored the presence of an array of attenuating strategies, which are employed to reduce speaker's commitment, such as modals, epistemic adverbs and epistemic verbs (Caffi 2007, Schneider 2007), and a set of psychological (otherwise so-called *private*) verbs such as *penso* (Eng. 'I think' (Blakemore 1992)), which are used by speakers to convey to each other their epistemic qualification of what is being asserted (Kaltenböck 2010).

3. OBJECT OF ANALYSIS: A SYNCHRONIC DESCRIPTION OF THE ECs

Before moving to the results of the analysis, we present a brief description of the ECs under examination. As previously mentioned, we select de-nominal and de-verbal sources on syntactic grounds. The former comprises: *ad esempio* and *per esempio*, *tipo* and *magari*. The latter comprises *non so*, *che ne so*, *che so*, *per dire*, *mettiamo* and *poniamo*. As we can see, the ECs under examination are very heterogeneous, ranging from constructions to locutions; however, all the forms share a semantic behaviour, that is, all of them could be paraphrased as the expressions *for example* or *for instance* in the contexts we consider in this work. Additionally, they may be set off prosodically from the rest of an utterance² (Kaltenböck *et alii* 2011 *inter alia*). To give a glance to the morphosyntactic and semantic features of the markers leading to exemplification, it can be argued that some regularities can be observed. The verbal sources generally select the deictic first person (singular or plural) of an epistemic predicate (for instance, *sapere* Eng. 'to know') and they can also occur with negation and interrogation markers (*che so*, *che ne so*, *non so*), which are generally described as *irrealis* devices, in that they depict an interrogation (*che so* and *che ne so*) which is a typical non-real scenario; moreover, *non so* describes a negation. Both the speech acts describe a sort of speaker uncertainty about a given claim. Then, *poniamo* and *mettiamo* clearly lexicalise a notion of hypothesis or, at least a process of illustrative meaning (*Let us suppose to have*); they seem to remove speaker's responsibility as well, given that the statement they introduce is presented as if it had been appealed or demanded, and simultaneously they plainly include the hearer, thus dividing the burden of work between speaker and hearer (Schneider 2007).

Concerning de-nominal ECs, *tipo* refers to a comparative, analogical meaning (see Voghera 2012, 2013a, 2013b). *Magari* also retains an intrinsically epistemic meaning, which could be a potential trigger to speed up pragmatic functions (Masini and Pietrandrea 2010). *Per esempio* and *ad esempio* clearly refer to the process of exemplification on textual and discursive grounds. Finally, *per dire* would seem to refer to the notion of textual reformulation (Bazzanella 2006, Ghezzi 2013). We would like to make a provisional consideration of the aforementioned regularities and tackle the question of how they might be functionally linked to the notion of attenuation. At a first glance, the constraints on de-verbal sources could indeed depict an idea of the contextually-entrenched operation of exemplification, namely an on-line process being performed within a specific situation (see,

2 Even if in the occurrences we selected ECs may be clearly set off in that they are inserted in between commas or in brackets, the claim should be tested on empirically-oriented prosodic studies.

for instance, the selection of the first person and the varying sources of epistemicity), thus strongly appealing to the common ground between the participants to the speech event.

4. THE FOCUS: EXEMPLIFICATION AND ATTENUATION

In this section we analyse in depth exemplification, which is a convenient device for the encoding of pragmatic attenuation in discourse. It indeed embodies the speakers' need to save their social faces in conversation. Speakers may deliberately introduce personal statements, considerations, suggestions, specific requests and other potential face-threatening acts *as examples* not to build a category, that is on purely semantic grounds, but as a strategy reducing the commitment to a given utterance; such a process reduces the risk a speaker might run when stating an assertion or a face-threatening speech act (Kaltenböck *et alii* 2010: 1). The aim of the paper is to provide additional evidence to some previous works, which underlined the pragmatic impact of exemplification in playing mitigation (see Caffi (2007), Schneider (2007), *inter alia*). However, we aim at analysing new samples of data and, partially, new devices of exemplification (such as *che ne so*, which did not receive much attention in the literature or *ad/per esempio*, which were plainly analysed in their illustrative function but less in their pragmatic functions of mitigation).

In the following sections, we first give a sketch of the ECs frequently used to cover mitigation functions and then we analyse in detail the actual contexts, by discussing representative instances per each function we have traced. Despite little internal differences, all the so-called pragmatic functions show as common base a sort of reduction of speaker's commitment to the propositional content; we ultimately try to discover how this weakening can be of use to convey an array of different pragmatic purposes. To describe such varying functions, we will underline different distributional patterns such as the *irrealis* status of the syntactic environment and the kind of the illocutionary force, by pointing out that the precise function of an utterance may partly be the final outcome of cooperative processes of negotiations between speaker and hearer (König and Siemund 2007: 276-277).

4.1. Some quantitative data

With respect to the ECs serving pragmatic functions, the so-called epistemic markers (such as *non so* and *magari*) are often used to convey these functions by virtue of their semantics referring to the speakers' intrinsic uncertainty; for instance, in the Nunc Corpus, the frequency of the pragmatic functions is 56 % of the total occurrences of the epistemic marker *che ne so*. The same marker covers pragmatic functions in the 83 % of the total frequency of its occurrences in the Lip Corpus, as in the following example:

- (7) *Io farei* *la* *trasmissione* *solamente* **che** **ne** **so**
 I do:COND.1SG DEF show only **che** **ne** **so**
da da *mezzanotte* *alle* *tre* *diciamo*
 from from midnight to.DEF three let's say
 'I would send the show only, **what do I know about it**, from from midnight to 3 a.m.,
 let's say'

(Lip Corpus)

Example (7) represents a typical instance of modulation in assertives, in that the speaker modulates her assertive force by uttering her proposal as an example. As previously mentioned, we may assume that categories can be created in discourse also for communicative purposes *other* than the mere construction of a given category in itself. For instance, providing an alternative as inserted in a set of actual options (as in (7)) may be considered just as a strategy to attenuate the commitment to the given suggestion.

Next, we are going to show an example of the ECs *che ne so* in the Nunc Corpus:

- (8) *Piuttosto sarebbe utile una bella campagna*
 Rather be:COND.3SG useful INDEF good campaign
informativa Che ne so cartelli formato famiglia informazioni
 information **Che ne so** billboards size family information
dettagliate sul retro degli skipass [...]
 detailed on:DEF back of:DEF skipass
 ‘I think it would rather be useful a good information campaign **what do I know about it**, size-family billboards, detailed information on the back of the ski passes [...]
- (Nunc Corpus)

In her work on the pragmatic functions of the marker *I don't know* (which is semantically similar to the ECs *che ne so* in Italian, Eng. ‘what do I know’), Tsui (1991) argues that the marker under examination functions as a strategy of commitment avoidance; the speaker utters a consideration in a form of a hypothetical example in order to protect her face. Moreover, in prefacing a given statement with a declaration of insufficient knowledge (as in the cases of *che so*, *che ne so* and *non so*) the speaker may indicate that she is not committed to the truth of the proposition expressed. Therefore, the speaker is free to retreat from such a position, if disputed (Tsui 1991: 621).

Then, unpredictably other devices such as *ad esempio* and *per esempio* may be employed to convey these functions as well, as in the following examples, respectively from the Lip and from the Nunc Corpus:

- (9) *puo' subentrare per esempio questa timidezza*
 can:PRS.3SG emerge:INF **per** **esempio** this shyness
questa che lei ha avuto dei genitori
 this REL she have[AUX]:PRS.3SG have:PFV.PTCP of:DEF parents
anziani
 old
 ‘It may emerge **for example** this shyness she has got from the old parents’
- (Lip Corpus)

- (10) *Vorrei ad esempio bloccare a mio*
 Want:COND.1SG **ad** **esempio** forbid:INF to my
figlio la visione di "Superpippa Channell"
 son DEF Vision of Superpippa Channell
 ‘I'd like, **for example**, to prevent my son from watching “Superpippa Channell”’
- (Nunc Corpus)

In (10), the speaker utters a specific request, she is not interested in constructing a category (even if she employs the most typical ECs, namely *ad esempio*); she is rather interested in attenuating her precise request.

In our three samples, *tipo* rarely plays pragmatic functions through the mediation of categorization (approximately 7 % in the Nunc Corpus) due to its approximation original semantics based on analogy mechanisms³. However, more updated data would be needed to support such a claim.

In the following table, we will briefly show the quantitative data:

| | Lip ⁴ | Nunc | Coris |
|--------------------|------------------|------|-------|
| <i>NON SO</i> | 38 % | 24 % | 14 % |
| <i>CHE SO</i> | 65 % | 39 % | 26 % |
| <i>CHE NE SO</i> | 83 % | 56 % | 28 % |
| <i>PER ESEMPIO</i> | 28 % | 23 % | 19 % |
| <i>AD ESEMPIO</i> | 17 % | 21 % | 37 % |
| <i>METTIAMO</i> | 25 % | 0 % | 12 % |
| <i>PONIAMO</i> | 0 % | 26 % | 24 % |
| <i>TIPO (CHE)</i> | 21 % | 7 % | 0 % |
| <i>MAGARI</i> | 38 % | 56 % | 18 % |
| <i>PER DIRE</i> | 30 % | 18 % | 14 % |

Table 1. Frequency of pragmatic functions per each EC in the three samples.

The study of pragmatic functions can be useful to account for a definition of the discursive status of the examples in conversation; in other words, by analysing them, we can understand whether an example is really such or whether exemplification is rather a discursive strategy of pragmatic attenuation, not having primarily to do with clarification or meaning construction in conversation (Caffi 2007). The instances of pragmatic functions are employed to utter proposals, requests, advice and other directive (and interrogative) speech acts as a matter of attenuation, thus protecting the negative face of the hearer, i.e. the desire to have freedom and not to be imposed upon. However, exemplification is also a rather specific device that enables speakers to epistemically comment on their discourse or to express their views and allows them to express some statements without directly submitting them to the hearer's judgement, thus protecting their face (Brown and Levinson 1987, Schneider 2014: 281).

³ See example (2) to have an idea of the pragmatic functions of *tipo (che)*.

⁴ These results should be considered cautiously, since the amount of the Lip sample is limited and it needs to be extended.

4.2. The results of the analysis

Let us start by discussing a typical instance of pragmatic function of attenuation via exemplification, namely the utterance of a suggestion as it were an example in order to protect the negative face of the hearer, as in the following example:

- (11) *Hai mai pensato di andare in Africa? O
 Have[AUX]:PRS.2SG never think:PFV.PTCP to go:INF to Africa Or
 se non in Africa, magari in Europa **che so**, in Grecia?
 if NEG to Africa maybe to Europe **che so** to Greece
 ‘Have your ever thought to to go to Africa? Or if non Africa, maybe to Europe, **what do I know**, to Greece?’*

(Coris Corpus)

In (11), the speaker is uttering a suggestion as an interrogation through exemplification in order to attenuate the coercive potential of the presumably face-threatening directive speech act. It is worth observing that in (11) the suggestion is encoded as an example, and it is also inserted in the interrogative form, namely a potentiality device to give the idea of the non-categorical choice (König and Siemund 2007). In addition, the so-called examples are items of a disjunctive list, precisely to convey that they are only potential suggestions or a wider set of alternatives (Masini and Pietrandrea 2010: 15). As the example shows, potentiality is a multifaceted notion often linked to the pragmatic functions at hand. We intend to underline that actually the intended goal of the speaker may be to focus exclusively on the mentioned suggestion; however, it is by presenting it as an example that discursively she conveys reference to a whole list of potential alternatives, thus relieving from total responsibility and avoiding impositions towards the hearer (Caffi 2007). In other words, exemplification is indeed a road to attenuation, where the strategy partially loses its source function of clarification to acquire an additional meaning of attenuation. Also in the ensuing example the speaker is uttering a precise suggestion in a weakened form:

- (12) *Bisogna magari **non so** mangiare un attimino di meno
 Be.necessary:3SG maybe **non so** eat:INF a little bit less
 ‘It is necessary maybe **I don’t know** to eat a little bit less’*

(Lip Corpus)

The speaker produces an instance of the so-called *tempering mitigation*, which is generally employed to reduce the validity of assertive and directive speech acts. The speaker’s opinion is lexically weakened by the impersonal verb *bisogna* (Eng. ‘it is necessary’) and by the co-occurrence between two epistemic ECs, namely *magari* and *non so*. Tempering mitigation results in a reduction either of the speaker’s commitment to what is said, in the case of the assertions, or of the categorical reality of a speaker’s judgment, in the case of directive speech acts. Tempering mitigation is of central importance in the modification of linguistic assertiveness, in that it can indirectly modulate in downgrading directions and other similar speech acts. By presenting two examples (*che so* and *non so*) where the ECs are in a sort intrinsically epistemic would lead to assume that the functions at issue may be played exhaustively by epistemic markers, which imply a certain degree of uncertainty and

non-factuality (see section 3). However, data provide empirical evidence for the claim that also non-epistemic markers may play pragmatic functions when employed in specific speech acts (interrogatives or directives, for instance) to express attenuation:

- (13) *sentiamo un po' dai nostri ospiti per*
 hear:SUBJ.PRS.1PL INDEF little.bit from:DEF our guests per
esempio che cosa pensano degli arbitri [...]
 example what think:PRS.3PL of:DEF referees
 'Let us hear from our guests **for example** what they think of the referees [...]'
 (Lip Corpus)

As previously mentioned, the EC *ad esempio* clearly lexicalises the process of exemplification. By virtue of this semantics, we postulated its focus over phrases instead of sentences. Additionally, we predicted a sort of constraint triggering strictly textual functions. However, the preference for the sentence (reaching the 67 % of the total amount of occurrences of *ad esempio* in the Nunc corpus, for example) is a first cue to its availability to cover also pragmatic functions; additionally, the sentence suggests that for the purpose at issue it is useful to select complex structures; actually, proposals are not typical discursive entities, or examples, in that they imply complex configurations, contrarily to phrases, whereby it would be more efficient to opt for a whole utterance to encode them. The example in (13) plays a mitigating function to the extent that the speaker invites the hearer to consider the request as a potential proposal, by conceptualizing it as an equipollent example of a potential, inferred list (Caffi 2007: 117). We may hypothesise that the ECs under examination plays an *interpersonal* function of mitigation (see Bazzanella 2006). The function of attenuation can also be identified on the basis of other contextual clues such as the empathic form *sentiamo un po'* (Eng. 'let's hear a bit what'), which is a typical feature of mitigated requests (König and Siemund 2007); indeed, the form presupposes a certain degree of consent and implies that the responsibility is shared to a certain extent, thereby attenuating the own communicative act (Waltereit 2002). Other connected functions can be detached in the following instance, which may be intended as a request for information (König and Siemund 2007) through the interrogative marker *che so*:

- (14) *è possibile creare il file comunque,*
 be:PRS.3SG possible create:INF DEF file however
saltando la parte mancante o che so mettendo
 skip:GER DEF section missing or **che so** put:GER
un'immagine fissa?
 INDEF image fixed
 'Is it possible to generate the file as well, by skipping the missing section or **what do I know** by putting a fixed image on it?'
 (Nunc Corpus)

In (14), the speaker utters a specific request in a weakened way, by encoding it in a form of interrogative speech act, aiming at eliciting a piece of information, which is useful to satisfy the speaker's conversational local needs (König and Siemund 2007: 2). The notion of potentiality is a morphosyntactic clue revealing such a function expressed through both

the interrogative sentence comprising a modal expression (*è possibile?* Eng. ‘is it possible?’) and the disjunctive list (see Masini and Pietrandrea 2010). The occurrence under examination is representative of a general pattern, where the speaker utters a specific request in the interrogative form and provides the hearer with other conceptually related options (namely, locally-relevant examples, which are active) the interlocutor should think of to satisfy the speaker’s current needs; such linguistic strategies mirror a process of mutual cooperation and the background knowledge of interlocutors (König and Siemund 2007). As already mentioned, it is worth pointing out that it is in the Nunc Corpus that several instances comprise also *ad/per esempio* introducing examples to play the pragmatic functions at hand. This distribution is probably connected to the textual typology of the corpus, namely newsgroups texts, a variety of topic-oriented texts where people can easily make requests when they intend to receive instructions and detailed information, by being indirect and polite. So, as the examples elucidate, although the main function of exemplification can vary to a certain extent, however it would seem that such a process can ultimately convey or presuppose a notion of common ground, as in the following example:

- (15) *Se avete voglia di scrivere qualcosa fatevi avanti!*
 If feel.like:PRS.2PL to write something come.forward:IMP.2PL
Magari anche che ne so su un aneddoto che
 maybe also **che ne so** on INDEF anecdote REL
vi sta a cuore etc.
 CLIT.2PL stay:PRS.3SG at heart etc.
 ‘If you feel like writing something, just come forward! Maybe also **what do I know** on an anecdote you matter and so on’

(Nunc Corpus)

The function of common ground-maintaining is a result of all the negative face-saving functions (Brown and Levinson 1987). In the example at hand, several features reveal the process of speech act attenuation, such as the hypothetical syntactic environment mirrored in the expression *se avete voglia* (Eng. ‘if you feel like’); the occurrence of the additive marker *anche* (Eng. ‘also’) leading not to consider the examples as exhaustive or absolute; then, another feature is the co-occurrence between two epistemic markers (*che ne so* and *magari*) and between the ECs and the general extender (*etc.*). In the example under examination, other non-exhaustivity devices index toward a politeness function linked to the notion of the non-categorical role of examples, namely the placeholder *qualcosa* (Engl. ‘something’ (Channell 1994)), which is a semantically vague device to be saturated with further entities the interlocutor is asked to think of; such further entities are similar to the mentioned example (*un aneddoto*, Eng. ‘an anecdote’). In conclusion, the category might comprise *articles, considerations, reflections on different topics*. The categorization is examples-driven, namely it is triggered by the overtly mentioned example, which is employed to help the hearer grasp the real meaning of the indirect suggestion and not to impose upon. ECs can also function as positive face-saving strategies; as anticipated, such a construct is the consistent self-image of a speaker, crucially including the wish that this self-projection be appreciated and approved of (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). Indeed, in the examples below, the speaker downgrades the evaluative (and/or coercive) strength of a statement to a mere hypothesis, properly by using an EC (Caffi 2007: 250). Indeed, when speakers expose

their epistemic stance pertaining to personal evaluations of a situation, they often utter such speech acts as conditional examples, as illustrated in the following occurrence (16):

- (16) *puo' essere piu' produttivo non so un*
 can:PRS.3SG be:INF more productive **non so** INDEF
intervento dal posto.
 intervention from:DEF place

'For her situation (it) can be more productive **I don't know** a free intervention'

(Lip Corpus)

Diverse linguistic strategies may be illustrative of the pragmatic functions under examination. In (16), the speaker employs the intrinsically epistemic EC co-occurring with the modal *può* (engl. *may*) declaring that the assertion is not to be considered absolute; it is rather an instance of her epistemic stance (Kärkkäinen 2003). The fact that the example is generally expressed by a sentence (reaching the 67 % of the total amount of the occurrences of *magari* in the Lip Corpus, to have an idea) would be another clue to its discursive status, namely it is not serving typical exemplification function, i.e. to explain and clarify meaning. In the case under examination the scope is rather on pragmatic grounds. Exemplification is not used to construct meaning on the basis of contextually-selected examples; rather it enables the speaker to set a consideration outside the current speech act and, thus, to distance it from the speaker commitment (Schneider 2014: 281). In specific circumstances, a statement of possibility such as in (16) *può essere più produttivo un intervento dal posto* (Eng. 'it can be more productive a free intervention') can be used as an indirect assertion if there is a hearer there who feels the speech act as a sort of indirect obligation to satisfy the needs of the speaker. In other words, such hints could merely be overlooked (König and Siemund 2007). The rationale behind the function of positive politeness could be clearer from the ensuing instance in (17), where the example acquires the form of a whole sentence:

- (17) *Riteniamo ad esempio che un aspetto non secondario*
 think:PRS.1PL **ad esempio** that INDEF aspect not secondary
sia la stessa questione della riduzione
 be:SBJV.PRS.3SG DEF same topic of:DEF reduction
dell'orario di lavoro
 of:DEF time of work

'We think **for example** that an important topic is indeed the work time reduction'

(Lip Corpus)

- (18) *Pensavo che si potrebbe scegliere*
 think:IPFV.PST:1SG that IMPERS can:COND.PRS.3SG choose:INF
argomenti inerenti alle cose che studiamo
 topics relevant to:DEF things REL study:PRS.1PL
tipo tecnica turistica [...]

tipo technique tourist
 'I thought to choose topics that are relevant to what we are studying in class **like** tourist technique [...]'

(Lip Corpus)

In (17) and (18), the speaker employs the two psychological verbs *riteniamo* (Eng. ‘we consider’) and *pensavo* (Eng. ‘I thought’), thus releasing herself from total commitment to the conveyed proposition; the mitigating effect is obtained by introducing an essential fact within a paradigm of similarly important facts, thus making it just one among the others (Caffi 2007: 272). Again, in (17), a complex structure like a sentence lends particularly useful when the speaker has to depict a complex scenario, precisely to make clear the idea of the concept he has in mind on the basis of a concrete example. Actually, a sentence would implicate that sometimes examples that are linguistically encoded by complex structures are not prototypical examples, that is to say, they are unlikely to cover illustrative functions. However, the employment of a sentence is not a necessary requirement of pragmatic functions, as it can be observed in the example (18), where the example is a nominal expression, which functions as an instance of the potential set *argomenti inerenti alle cose che studiamo* (Eng. ‘topics that are relevant to what we are studying in class’). In presenting personal evaluations and beliefs as examples, the speaker de-intensifies her utterance: ECs can be used to release the speaker from a categorical commitment to the propositional content. Put differently, exemplification might ultimately develop into a fact of modalisation, whereby expressing the epistemic stance of speakers in conversation (Schneider 2007). In addition to the conventional devices of modalisation (modals, adverbs, grammatical moods), it would be that a typical textual function, such as exemplification, may in turn develop into a fact of modalisation, given that it can be employed to indirectly express a specific epistemic posture or to encode a face-threatening act in a weakened way. Following Schneider’s classification of parentheticals⁵, we could assert that ECs can affect the neustic level of utterance, namely the act of subscription to the speech act that is going to be carried out, which expresses the speaker’s commitment to the notion of potentiality, desirability, necessity etc. of its propositional content (Schneider 2007)⁶.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The focus of this paper is the linguistic expression of a basic process, namely exemplification with a specific focus on its pragmatic functions. After a definition of exemplification in purely textual and ideational grounds (cf. *illustrative function*), the pragmatic implications observed in our survey based on three corpora samples have been discussed and exemplified, revealing a deal of formal and functional regularity. After anticipating the attested regularities, the analysis of the pragmatic functions of exemplification has pointed to a different perspective, expanding the focus from the notion of on-line categorisation, to a specific employment of categorization via exemplification to cover pragmatic functions, and ultimately to a fine-grained analysis of the pragmatic functions at hand.

5 Following Hare (1970), Schneider (2007) made three distinctions on the basis of the focus of the so-called reduced parenthetical clauses (RPC) he analysed. The *phrastic* level refers to the propositional content, that is, the level of an utterance which is common to corresponding assertive, interrogative, and directive speech acts. The *tropic* level indicates the illocutionary force of a given utterance; in conclusion, the *neustic* level indicates the speaker’s commitment to the desirability, necessity, factuality etc. of the propositional content of a given utterance (Schneider 2007).

6 List of abbreviations: AUX = auxiliary; CLIT = clitic; COND = conditional; DEF = definite; FUT = future; GER = gerundive; IMP = imperative; IMPERS = impersonal marker; IPFV = imperfective; INDEF = indefinite; NEG = negation; PFV = perfective; PL = plural; PRS = present; PST = past; PTCP = participle; REFL = reflexive marker; REL = relative pronoun; SG = singular; SUBJ = subjunctive

Exemplification leads to attenuation through the mediation of the process of categorisation; our aim is to show that even if the speaker aims at performing a pragmatic function, there is always the mediation of a process of categorisation; therefore, we may argue that the cognitive process is not very different from the cases in which the speaker intends to build a category without pragmatic ends (see examples (1), (4) and (6)). Therefore, we may hypothesise that exemplification is a means of categorisation and from there to attenuation too. The key notion is the on-line selection of examples, which are contextually relevant for a given contextual task. In such a process, the role of alternatives is crucial, because it is properly the presupposition of a set that triggers a pragmatic function of attenuation, in that the hearer is made free to choose between more examples, in addition to the expressed ones.

Again, a crucial regularity which emerges pertains to the notion of epistemicity linked to exemplification: it may be observed in the systematic preference for a potential environment in which exemplification occurs and in the consistent amount of intrinsically epistemic markers covering pragmatic functions (see the amount of pragmatic functions played by *non so*, *che so*, *che ne so*, and *magari* in the three samples). Such an environment is the ideal scenario to convey attenuation. Moreover, we may hypothesise that the selection of intrinsically epistemic markers (see *non so*, *che so*, *che ne so*) is crucial in developing pragmatic functions of attenuation, given that such markers intrinsically depict hypothetical notions. Additionally, other linguistic clues have emerged in the encoding of attenuation: the role of lists, the impact of psychological verbs and the co-occurrence between ECs and other vague categorisation devices, such as placeholders and general extender (cf. Voghera 2013a, 2013b). This study constitutes a first step of a wider study in which a diachronic perspective is needed. A comprehensive picture of how languages encode (and speakers use) pragmatic exemplification may have an impact on the study of epistemic modality and epistemic stance and, in general, on the notion of recurrent patterns in semantic shift; as Traugott and Dasher (2002) state, several textual markers (related to linguistic planning and to the organization of the discourse) may develop into markers expressing speaker's attitude and attenuation functions (of politeness): they may indeed function as softeners, by mitigating the assertive force of a face-threatening speech act (see Tsui 1991, *inter alia*). Indeed, it would seem that, from textual functions, exemplification may evolve into a fact of subjective modalization and of intersubjective common ground seeking, maintaining and presupposing. Then a final remark being made is the variety of the speech acts in which an EC occurs, ranging from direct to indirect and from assertive to directive ones. The next step could be a taxonomy of all the speech acts per each construction and per each fine-grained function.

So, basing essentially on previous works on vagueness and categorisation (cf. Caffi 2007; Voghera 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Mauri 2017), this first study could be the starting point for a comprehensive work on discursive analysis grounds and on semantic shift grounds. In addition to some understudied ECs, such as *che ne so*, we intend to extend the set of markers by introducing *mettiamo il caso* (Eng. 'Let us take/consider the case'), *mettiamo l'ipotesi* (Eng. 'Let us take the hypothesis'), the second person markers *metti*, *poni*, *prendi* (Eng. 'take') and other markers such as *anche* (Eng. 'also').

In conclusion, it is worth noting that, even if our focus was to compare the behaviour of the ECs in the three samples of the corpora (Lip, Coris, and Nunc), then the analysis developed in more qualitative terms. The only macro-difference we may hypothesise pertains to the frequency of the ECs' pragmatic functions in the corpora: in the Coris Corpus the

pragmatic functions are less attested than in the other samples, as it can be seen in *Table 1*. However, i) the Lip sample is quantitatively very limited, so we could quantify the effective difference as soon as the samples are comparable; ii) consequently, the samples need to be extended, otherwise our argumentations run the risk to be pretentious, given the reduced amount of data; such a limited number of data may justify the null occurrence of pragmatic functions played by some ECs (such as *tipo* in the Coris Corpus); iii) we need to refine the range of functions, by quantifying negative politeness-oriented vs positive politeness-oriented functions, direct speech acts vs indirect speech acts and so on; in this way our qualitative insights might reside on more solid quantitative analysis. Now, our analysis is essentially qualitative.

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