Distribution and function(s) of parenthetical *mi sembra/mi pare* in spoken Italian

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DOTTORATO IN STUDI LETTERARI, LINGUISTICI E STORICI

Overview

1. Introduction

2. Data and annotation

3. Distribution of *mi sembra/mi pare*

4. Pragmatic scope and functions

5. Epistemic meaning

6. Open questions

7. Conclusions

Introduction: *sembrare* and *parere*

- *sembrare* and *parere* 'seem' → verbs of appearance, near-synonyms (e.g., Lindvall 1986; Leone 2008)

↓

Class with unclear boundaries → verbs expressing cognition and perception (source-oriented)

(cf. Musi 2015; Gisborne & Holmes 2007; Jacquin et al 2022)

- Appearance meaning → epistemic uncertainty (but also indirect evidentiality)

"what appears […] is not necessarily claimed to be true" (Squartini 2018: 281)

Introduction: parenthetical *mi sembra/mi pare*

- Parenthetical *mi sembra/mi pare* → Mitigation strategies (Bazzanella 1995; Caffi 2007; Schneider 2007)

  (1)   non c'è ancora niente mi sembra come inizio di travaglio

        'it seems to me there're still no signs of labor' (Caffi 2007: 243)

- Indirect mitigators of the neustic (Schneider 2007) → alleviate speaker's epistemic commitment

  ↓   to the truth of the propositional content

  operate on the whole clause (clausal scope)

  ↓

  However, we know that clausal mitigators can optionally take scope over a phrasal constituent (as "marked" and less frequent option, cf. Schneider 2007: 186; Kaltenböck 2010)

  Question: Is phrasal scope a marked option with *mi sembra/mi pare*? Does it entail different functions?

Introduction: parenthetical *mi sembra/mi pare*

▪ Even though they are referred to as evidentials (cf. Caffi & Janney 1994; Schneider 2007), no source of information is specified in the literature→ simply markers of uncertainty?

▪ However, at least *mi sembra/mi pare* "main-verb" cxn can express various sources:

(2)   Mi sembra che il centro commerciale fu costruito negli anni '70.   [Memory]
      'It seems to me that the shopping mall was built in the Seventies.' (Miecznikowski & Musi 2015: 275)

(3) - Mi sembra/pare che Maria sia malata.   'It seems to me that Maria is ill'   [Inference]
     - Perché?   'Why?'
     - Perché è pallida e non esce più.   'Because she is pale and she hasn't been going out'
       (adapted from Kratschmer 2006: 11)

Question: Can parenthetical cxns express such evidential meanings?

Introduction: aims of the study

- Since there are studies dedicated only to *mi sembra/mi pare* in spoken Italian, the aim is to describe their behaviour

- Parenthetical cxns → occurrences with no overt syntactic link with the host clause (Schneider 2007)

↓

N.B:
compl. omission cxns with subjunctive verb (e.g., *Mi sembra sia* vero '*It seems to me it's true*') were not included (cf. Fagard et al. 2016)
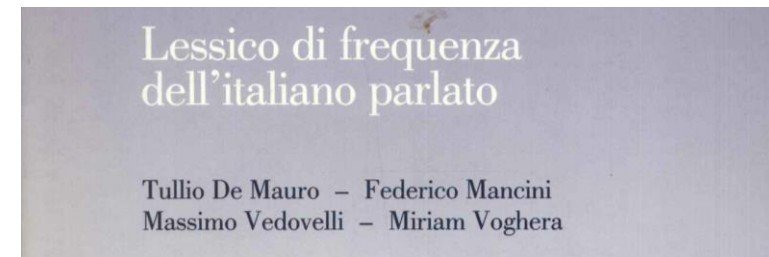
- In particular we will focus, primarily from a quantitative point of view, on:

  1. their distribution → in which contexts *mi sembra/mi pare* appear more often?

  2. Their epistemic/evidential meanings → can *mi sembra/mi pare* express sources of information?

  3. Their pragmatic scope and the functions associated to it → are *mi sembra/mi pare* used as phrasal mitigators? How frequently?

Data and annotation: corpora

- Two corpora of spoken Italian → LIP (De Mauro et al. 1993) and KIParla (Mauri et al. 2019)

  - Five macrogroups of communicative situations:
    - A. *Face-to-face conversations*
    - B. *Telephone conversations*
    - C. *Non-free dialogical interactions (e.g., interviews)*
   - D. *Monologic speech*
    - E. *Radio and TV speech*

    Lessico di frequenza dell'italiano parlato

    Tullio De Mauro – Federico Mancini
    Massimo Vedovelli – Miriam Voghera

    Corpus KIParla
    L'italiano parlato e chi parla italiano

- total occurrences of parenthetical *mi sembra/mi pare*: 117 (frequency: 7.65 on 100.000 tokens)

Data and annotation: coded variables

- **Type of speech situation:** cf. previous slide

- **Position in the Intonation Unit (IU):** initial, medial, final

- **Scope:** clausal, phrasal

  ↓

the crucial factor for disambiguation was intonation (occurrences with missing audio were discarded)
  - **Direction of the scope:** forward, forward-backward, backward

- **Epistemicity** (cf. Boye 2012)**:** opinion, impression, memory, uncertainty

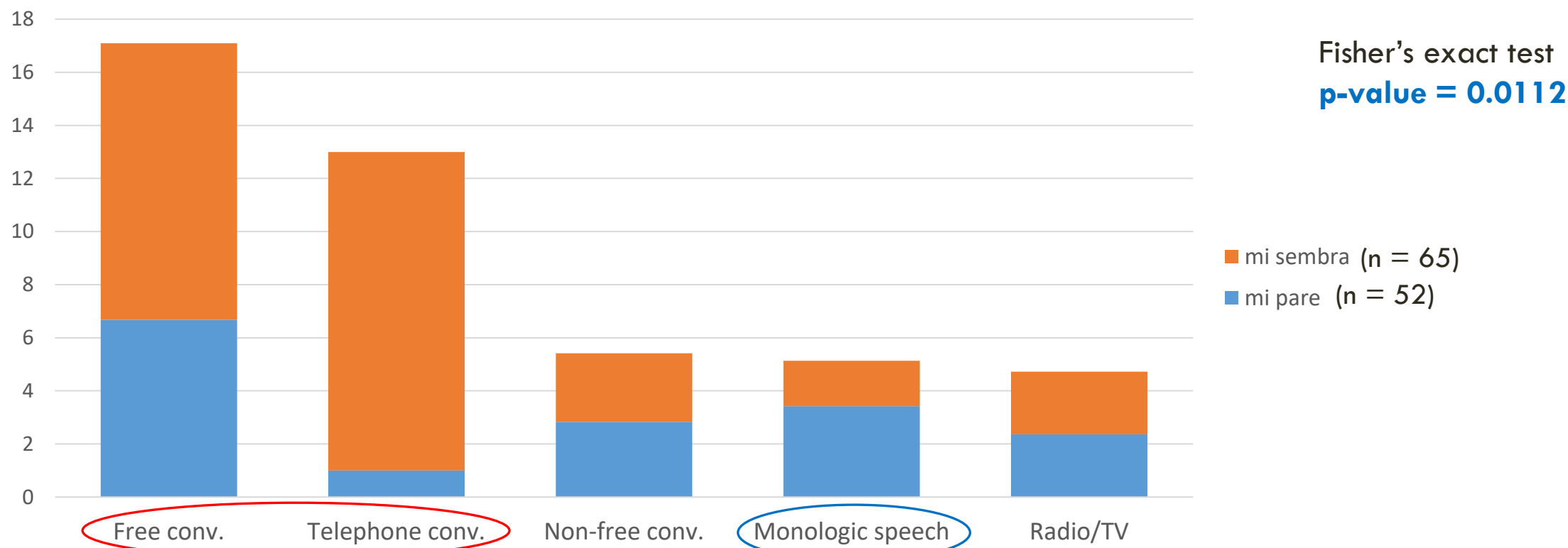   (after a first examination of the occurrences)

Distribution: speech situations

Frequency in speech situations (per 100.000 words)
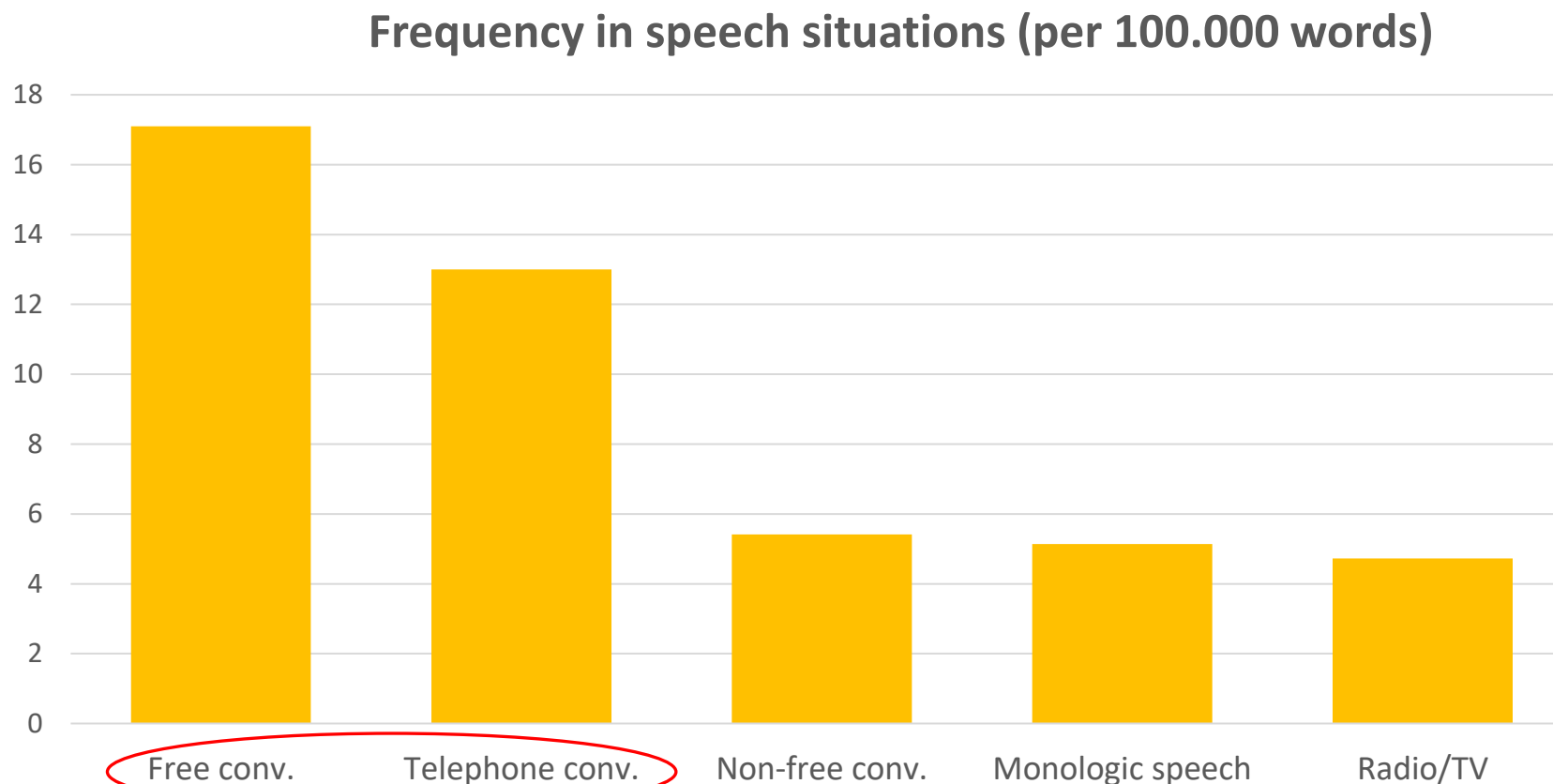
Chi-squared test
(Goodness of fit)
p-value < 0.0001

Distribution: speech situations

Frequency in speech situations (per 100.000 words)

Fisher's exact test
p-value = 0.0112

■ mi sembra (n = 65)
■ mi pare (n = 52)

Distribution: position

Position of *mi sembra/mi pare* in the IU

	initial	medial	final
	17	33	53
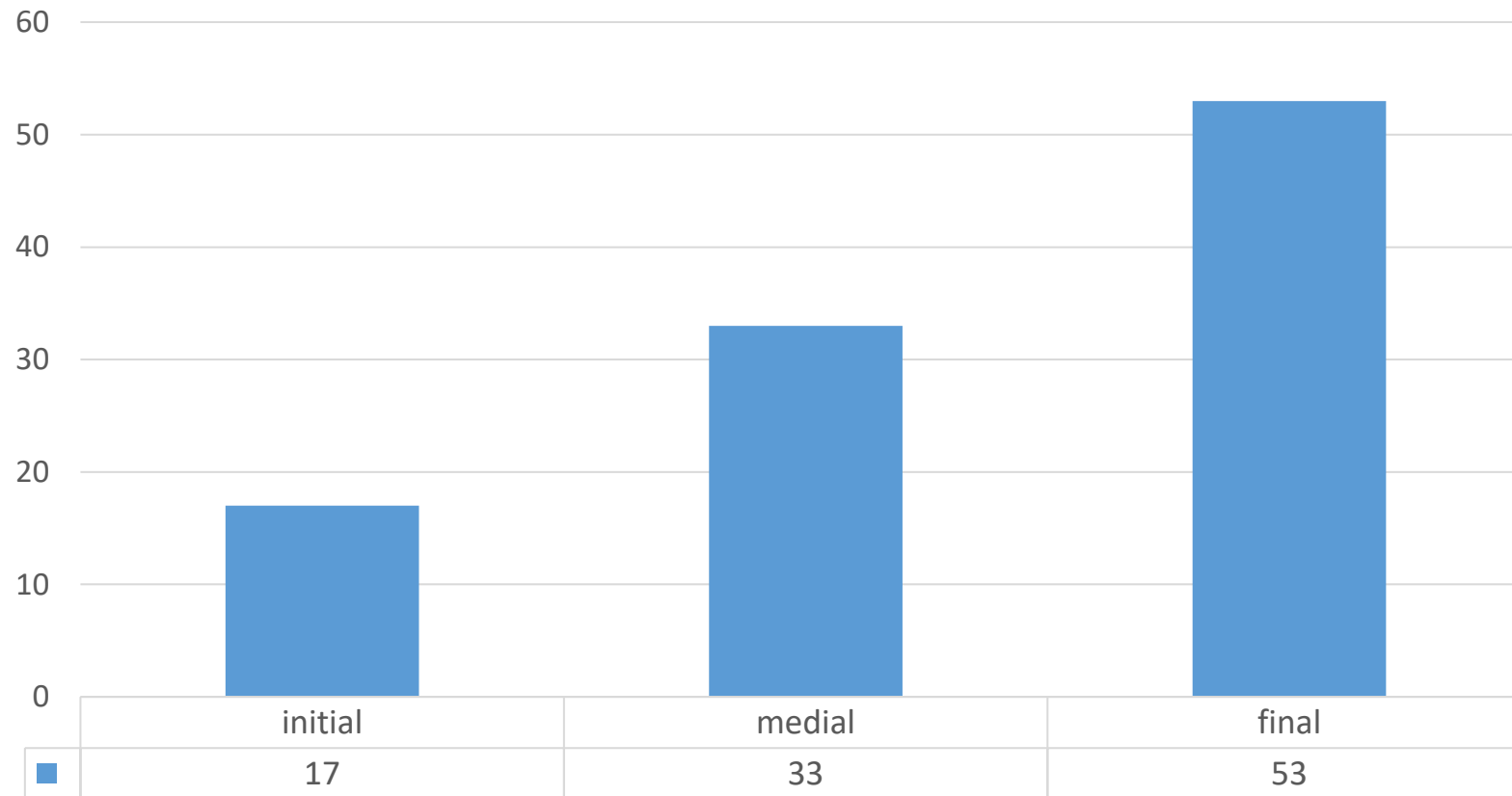
- Even if parenthetical verbs can be positioned freely, they tend to appear in final position in the IU (p-value < 0.0001)

(cf. Rossari 2012 on *paraît* 'it seems')

↓

"Natural" environment for epistemic afterthoughts / to comment on speaker's own discourse? (Kaltenböck 2013)

Distribution: position

Position of mi sembra/mi pare in the IU

- Even if parenthetical verbs can be positioned freely, they tend to appear in final position in the IU (p-value < 0.0001)

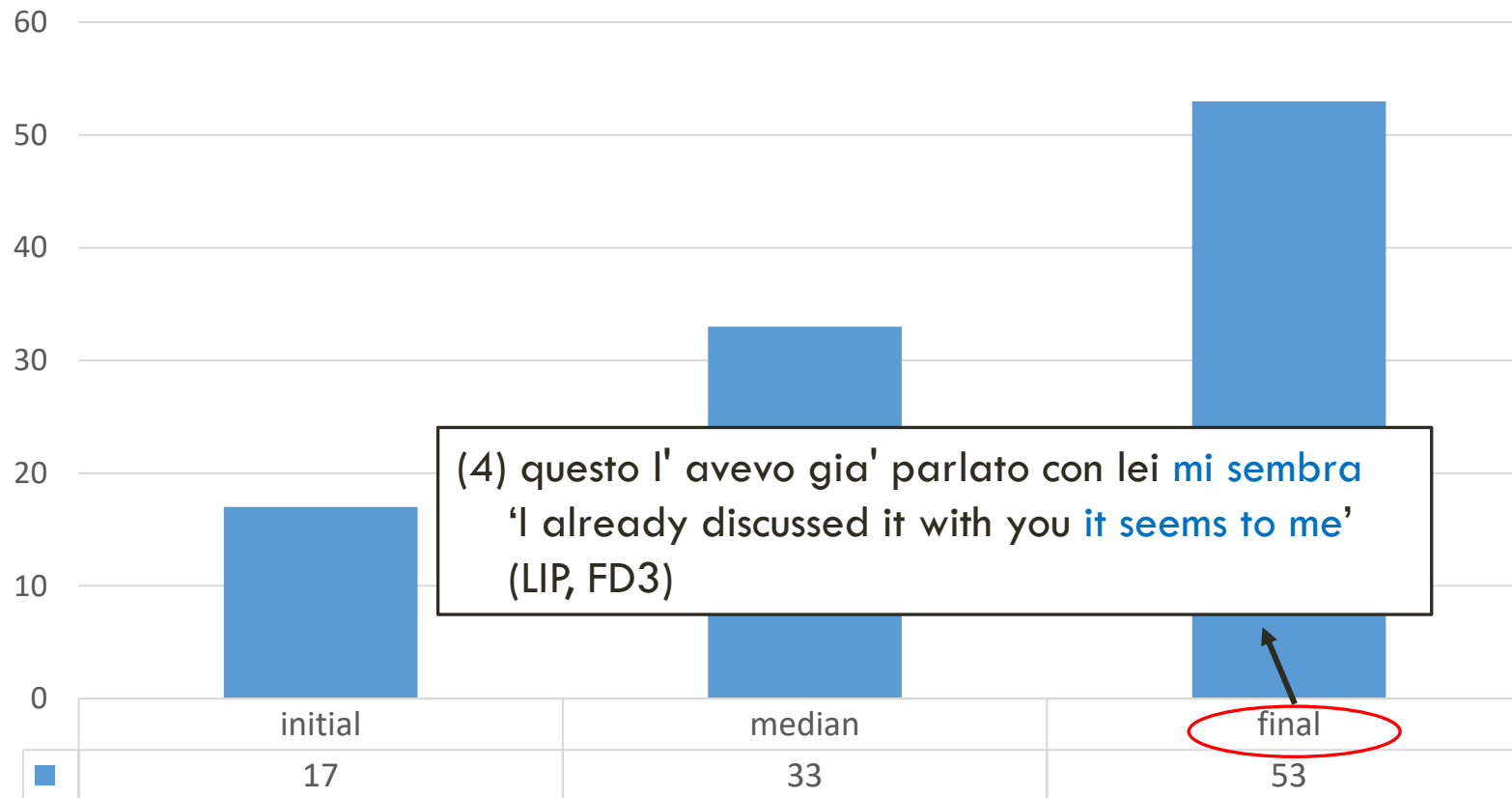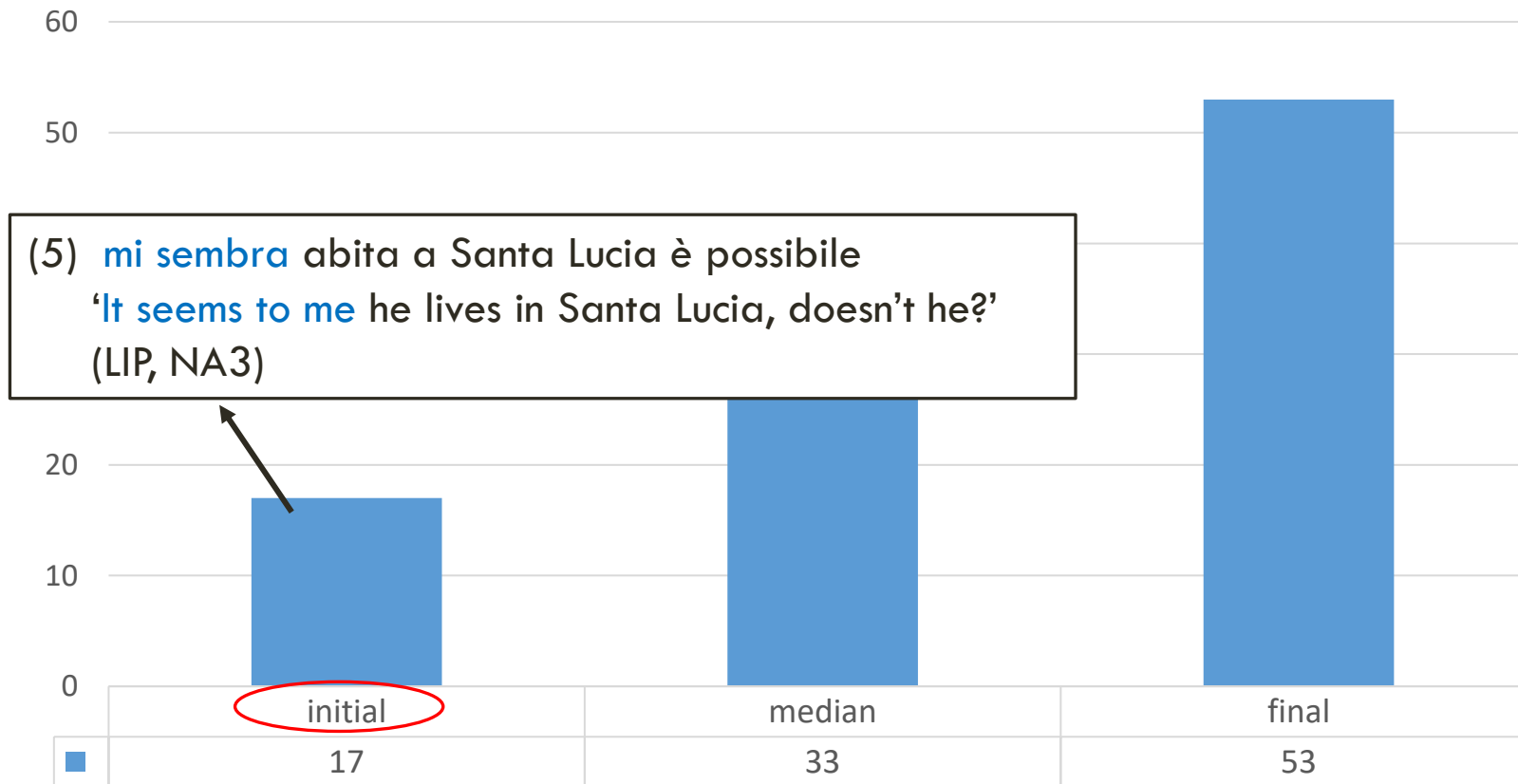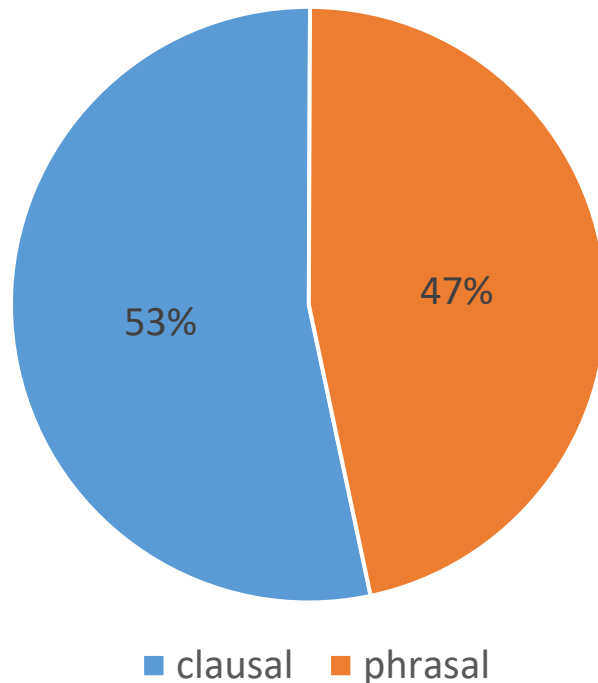(4) questo l' avevo gia' parlato con lei mi sembra
'I already discussed it with you it seems to me'
(LIP, FD3)

	initial	median	final
	17	33	53

Distribution: position

Position of mi sembra/mi pare in the IU

> However, we also find examples of *mi sembra/mi pare* in initial position

(5) mi sembra abita a Santa Lucia è possibile

  'It seems to me he lives in Santa Lucia, doesn't he?'
  (LIP, NA3)

	initial	median	final
	17	33	53

Pragmatic scope and functions

Scope of *mi sembra/mi pare*

- clausal ■ phrasal
- 53%
- 47%

- Phrasal scope should be a "marked option"!

↓

cf. data from Kärkkäinen 2010 → 10.7%

Kaltenbock 2008 → 22.9%

- Even if we assumed the occurrences with missing audio (n = 7) and the unclear cases (n = 6) to be "clausal", the proportion would still be 58% vs. 42%

Pragmatic scope and functions

Scope of *mi sembra/mi pare*

(7) nel vangelo di Matteo nel capitolo [ventitreesimo] mi sembra in un' altra parabola dove ci narra […]
 'in the gospel of Matthew in chapter twenty-three it seems to me in another parable, where he tells us […]' (LIP, RD16)
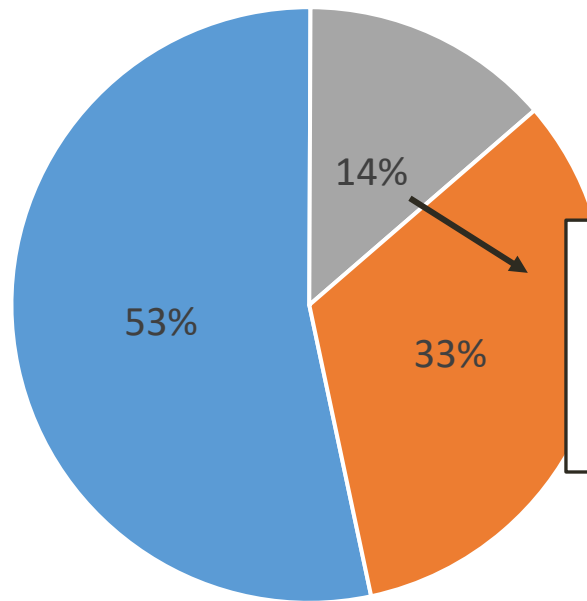
53%

47%
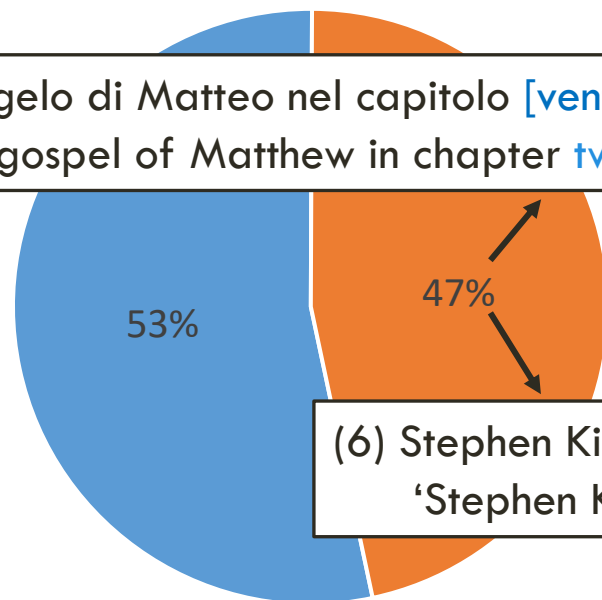
(6) Stephen King mi sembra [in It] // diceva che eh le persone assorbono la citta'
 'Stephen King it seems to me [in It] // says that people assimilate their city' (KIParla, PTD009)

■ clausal ■ phrasal

Pragmatic scope and functions

Scope of *mi sembra/mi pare*

- clausal
- phrasal_elliptical
- phrasal

53%
14%
33%

- N.B.: *phrasal* includes "elliptical hosts" (cf. Kaltenböck 2010)

↓

Generally answers to an immediately preceding question

(8) TOI001: a chi hai dato per primo le carte che non ho vis[to]
'to whom you first gave the cards? I didn't see'
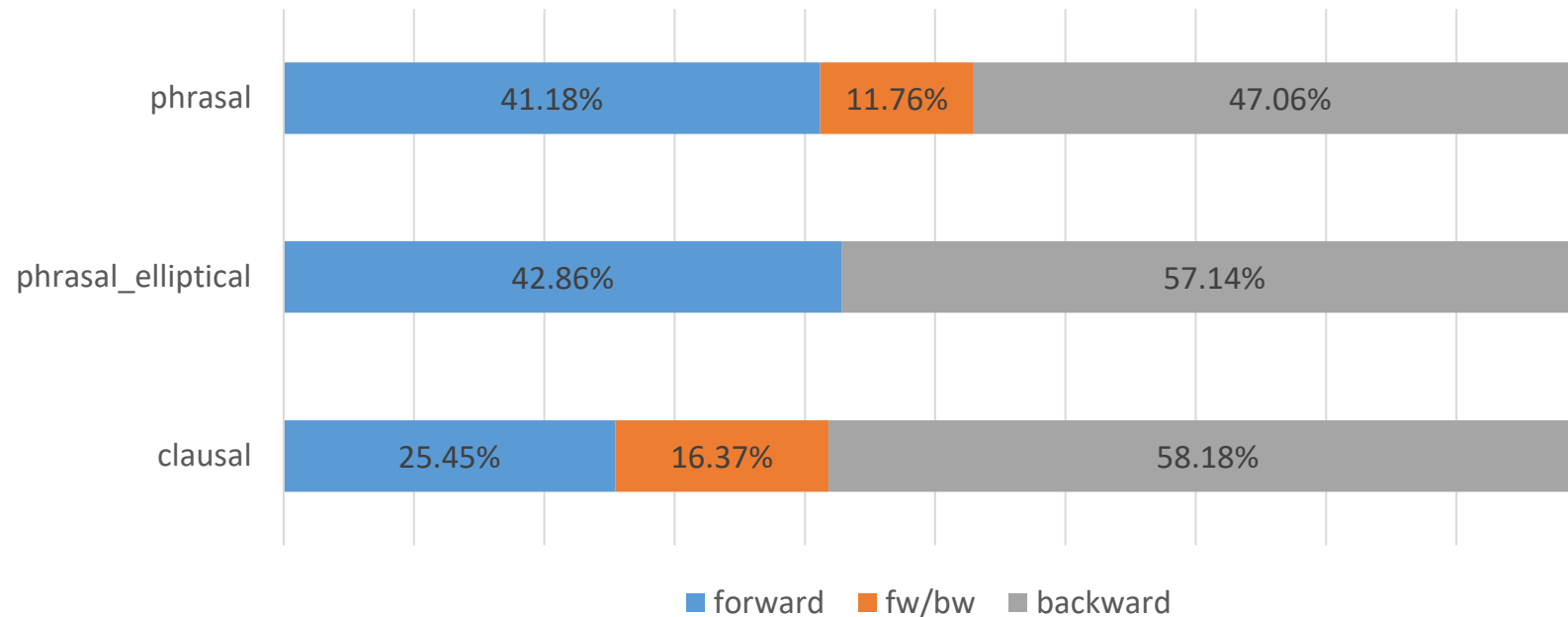TOR002: a lei mi sembra
'to her, it seems to me' (KIParla, PTA001)

- We separate these occurrences from "simple" *phrasal* ones, since they might show a different behaviour

Pragmatic scope: direction of the scope

- Different tendencies in the direction of the scope:
  - Epistemic markers with phrasal scope → higher presence of forward scope (cf. Kärkkäinen 2010)

- Could this difference hint at some peculiar pragmatic function of phrasal scope constructions?

Pragmatic scope and mitigating function

▪ Do *mi sembra/mi pare* with phrasal scope have a different function? Two hypotheses

No: they just reduce speaker's commitment to the thruth of the host construction (hedges) (Schneider 2007: 186)

Yes: they can have an approximator-like interpretation (Kaltenböck 2010)

▪ Some occurrences of *mi sembra/mi pare* with phrasal scope seem to be hedges (cf. examples 7,9):

(9) TOI001: a chi hai dato per primo le carte che non ho vis[to]
        'to whom you first gave the cards? I didn't see'
    TOR002: a lei mi sembra
        'to her, it seems to me' (KIParla, PTA001)

Pragmatic scope and and mitigating function

- However, the interpretation depends on the type of phrase under the scope (cf. Kaltenböck 2010) :

  - 70% of phrasal hosts are numerals (43.75%) or proper nouns (27.08%) → semantic 'precision' triggers fuzzyness and favours approximation

(10) ah noi partiremo [il nove] # mi sembra agosto

   'ah we will leave [on the ninth] it seems to me August''

   (LIP, NB33)

> We expect the speaker to be approximating the actual date as much as possible ('9th of August or some date close to the 9th')

  - This is even more evident in the cases (16.67%) in which we find the phrase approximated by other elements:

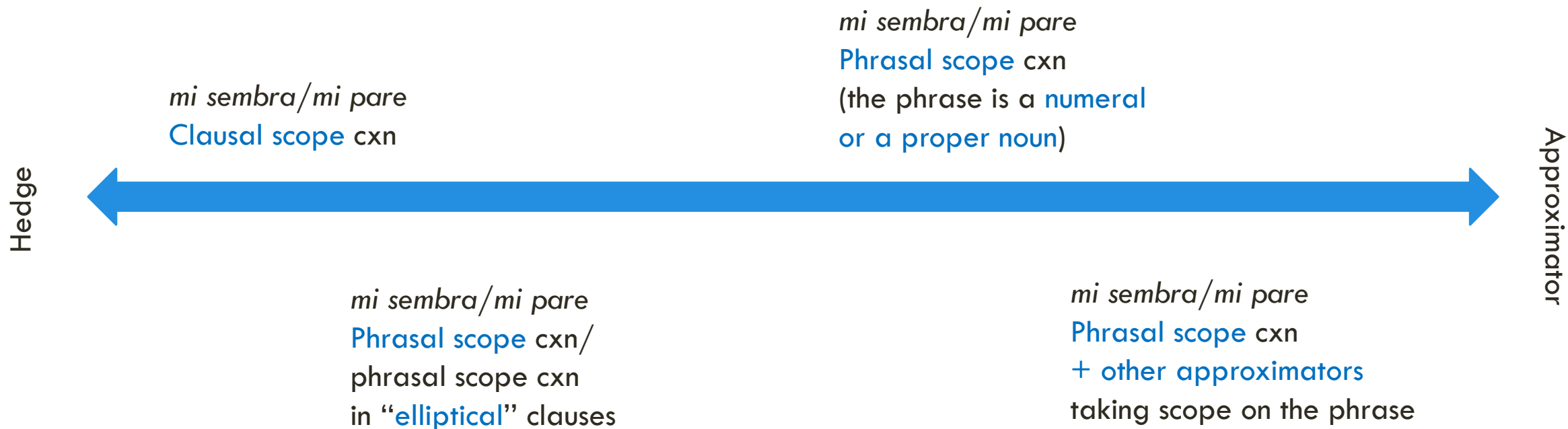(11) si' si e' laureata con centodieci e lode // tipo nel novantanove mi pare

   'yes she graduated with first class honours, like in nineteen ninety-nine it seems to me'
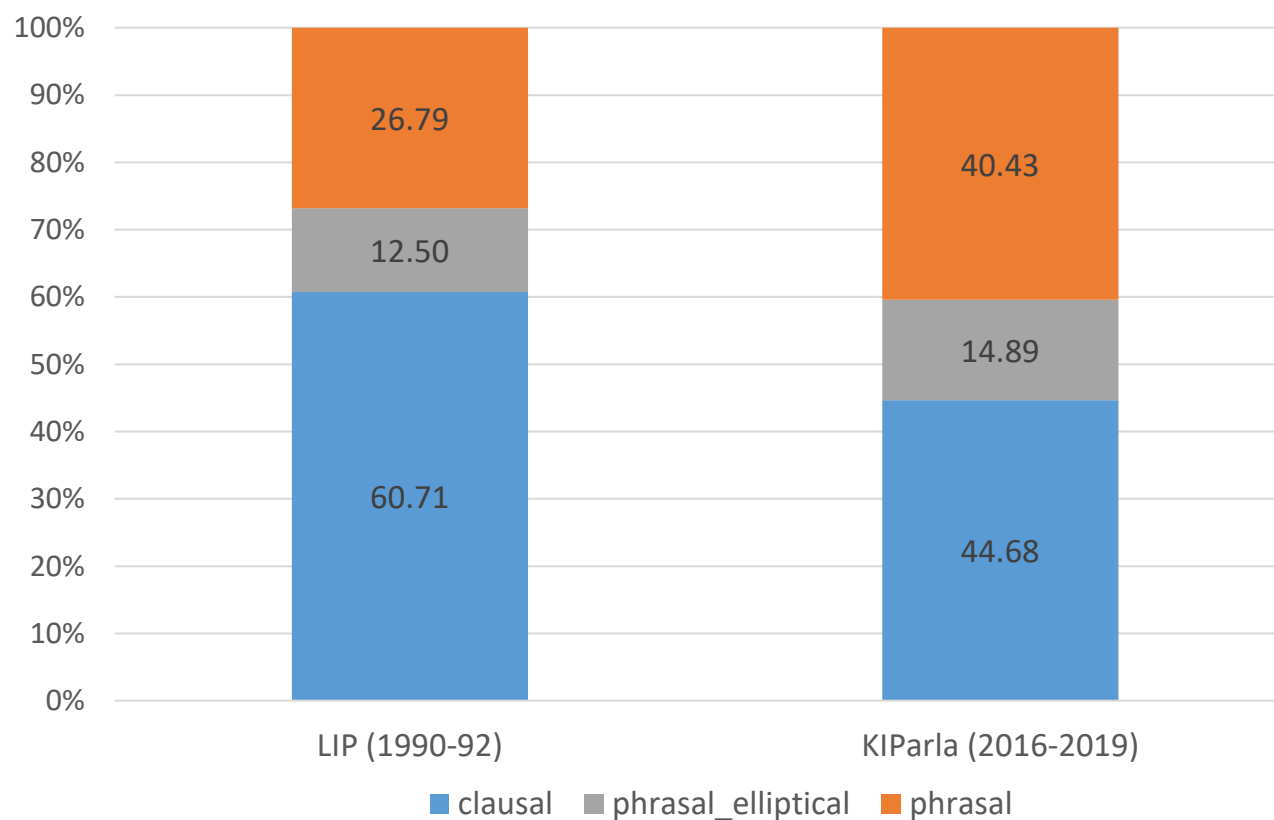
   (KIParla, BOA3001)

> *mi pare* could be interpreted as a "reinforcement" of the approximator *tipo* 'like'

A continuum of mitigation with *mi sembra/mi pare*

mi sembra/mi pare
Phrasal scope cxn
(the phrase is a numeral
or a proper noun)

mi sembra/mi pare
Clausal scope cxn

Hedge

Approximator

mi sembra/mi pare
Phrasal scope cxn/
phrasal scope cxn
in "elliptical" clauses

mi sembra/mi pare
Phrasal scope cxn
+ other approximators
taking scope on the phrase

A diachronic trend?

Scope of *mi sembra/mi pare* in LIP and KIParla

Not significant difference, but it still could hint at some change in progress

Epistemic meaning: opinion and impression

▪ A quite clear division can be traced between opinion and impression vs. uncertainty and memory

▪ opinion (16) and impression (17) account for a small part of the dataset: 8 (7.1%) and 6 (5.4%) examples

(12) signor presidente # io esprimo un mio_ parere personale penso anche dei consiglieri del gruppo # che mi sembra affronta la situazione nuova che si e' venuta a creare # nel golfo

'Mr President I am expressing a personal opinion, I think also of the councillors of the group, that addresses, it seems to me, the new situation that has arisen in the gulf' (LIP, MC1)

(13) pero' a me mi sembra con [NomeProprio] no e' divertente noi siamo sempre allo stesso punto ci incontriamo due volte all'anno […] e diciamo sempre le stesse cose

'but it seems to me with [ProperNoun], it's funny, we are always at the same place...we meet twice a year [...] and we always say the same things.' (LIP, NA11)

Epistemic meaning: opinion and impression

In these examples the meaning is quite similar to mi sembra as main clause
→ we find them often in initial position (cf. example 14)

(12) signor presidente # io esprimo un mio_ parere personale penso anche dei consiglieri del gruppo # che mi sembra affronta la situazione nuova che si e' venuta a creare # nel golfo
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Epistemic meaning: a problem with memory?

- However, in most of the cases (about 50% of the total) it is clear that the speaker is uncertain on some previously available information that they are recovering from memory

↓

(15) c'e' un pezzo che lui registra nel cinqaun totto mi pare in un disco
'there's a piece that he recorded in nineteen-fifty…eight it seems to me in a record'
(KIParla, BOD1010)

unlike, e.g., in Caffi's (2007) example we saw earlier

(16) non c'è ancora niente mi sembra come inizio di travaglio
'it seems to me there're still no signs of labor' (cf. example 1)

Maybe the high number depends on the types of interactions in the corpora: e.g., people being interviewed about past events

Scope and epistemicity: an open question

▪ Could the lack of precision of unclear memory have favoured an approximator-like extension of *mi sembra/mi pare*? (75% of 'phrasal' occ. mark more or less explicitly memory)

…There seems to be no significant pattern connecting scope and epistemicity

→ We find examples of clausal scope *mi sembra/mi pare* marking a mnemonic source:

(17) ci siamo parlati noi all' inizio di quest' anno mi pare * vero *

'we spoke to each other earlier this year it seems to me, isn't it?'

(LIP, FA13)

> However, it should be checked if the memory meaning serves the same purposes in clausal and phrasal occurrences

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However, it should be checked if the memory meaning serves the same purposes in clausal and phrasal occurrences

e.g., requests for confirmation appear only in the context of "clausal" occurrences.
In cases like (20) the memory meaning favours a backchecking function (Squartini 2013; 2017) i.e., the speaker checking some previously shared info, by assigning the hearer a higher epistemic position (cf. Jacquin et al. 2022)

Pragmatic scope: a look at speech situations

- The distribution of phrasal and clausal occurrences in speech situations could be a hint at a difference in their interactional function:
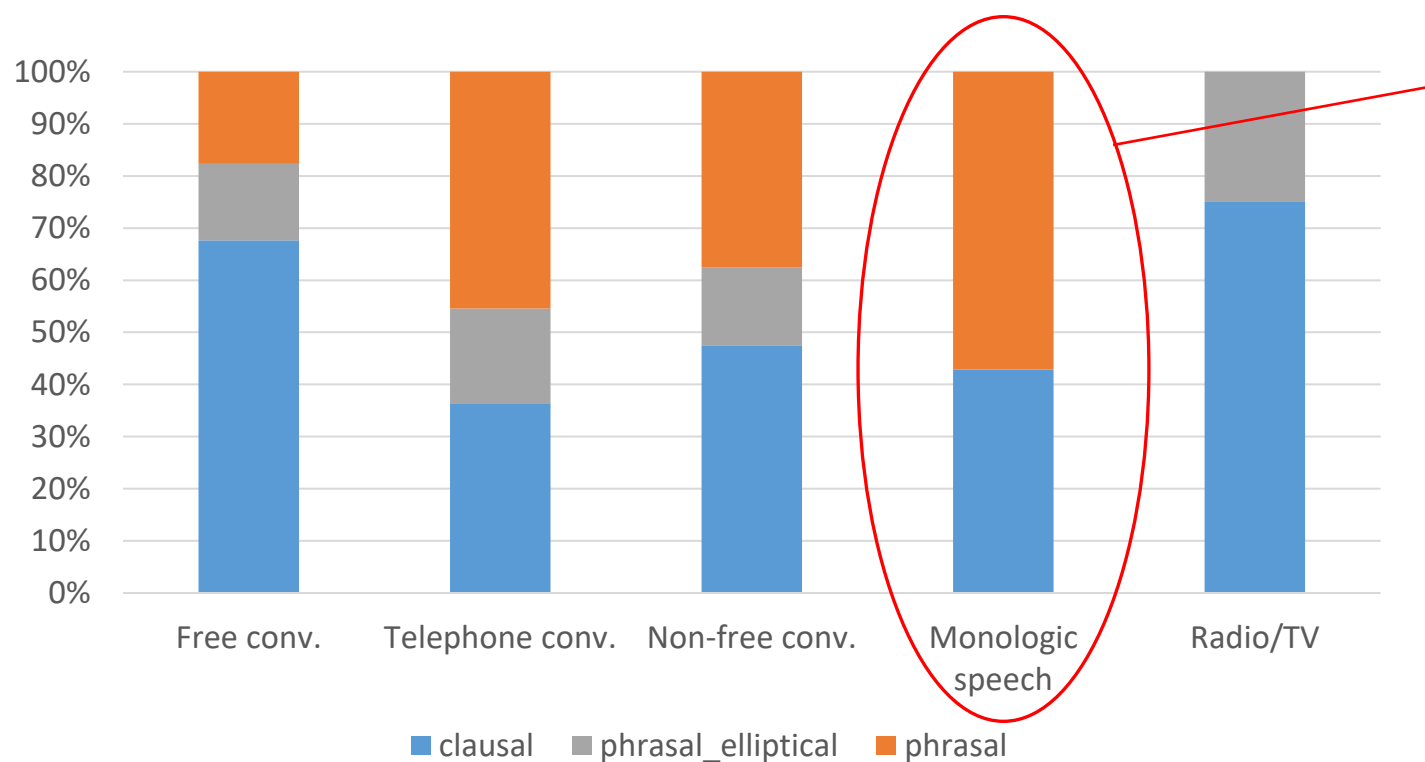
mi sembra/*mi pare* with phrasal scope are more used in situations where the speaker is not uncertain about the whole SoA (e.g., in more planned speech situations such as monologues), but is only (maybe unexpectedly) missing some detail that we can assume they previously had available (due to lack of memory?)

Chart legend: clausal, phrasal_elliptical, phrasal
Categories: Free conv., Telephone conv., Non-free conv., Monologic speech, Radio/TV

Conclusions

- *mi sembra* and *mi pare sono* have been described as hedges with clausal scope, primarily marking speaker's epistemic uncertainty about the SoA presented

↓

Our data show that instead they have quite often a phrasal scope, sometimes with an approximator-like interpretation (depending on the contexts and on the elements under the scope), confirming the data by previous studies on hedges (e.g., Kaltenböck 2010; Kärkkäinen 2010)

- The expression of uncertainty is often accompanied by the (more or less explicit) indication of
unclear memory as speaker's source of information (corpus dependent?)
→ not linked to a specific scope cxn,

BUT

- the same epistemic meanings could be employed for different interactional functions depending on the scope (further qualitative research is needed on interactional functions)

Thank you for your attention!
Comments and questions are welcome!

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