

Acquiring (illocutionary) complementisers: Preliminary insights from Catalan and Spanish, and beyond

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2023 LAGB Annual Meeting, 31 August

I. Introduction

The development of complementisers

Initial observations

- Acquisition of **complementisers** and subordination typically taken to be a crosslinguistically **relatively late phenomenon** in child language (e.g., Armon-Lotem, 2005; Clahsen and Penke, 1992).
- Earliest forms include so-called *preconjunctionals*. The emergence of subordinators, such as Catalan and Spanish *que*, is a later development.
 - Often accounted for via 'bottom-up' approaches to syntactic development, whereby the CP is acquired last (Radford, 1988; Rizzi, 1994; Friedmann et al., 2021; Diercks et al., 2023).

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 - Often accounted for via 'bottom-up' approaches to syntactic development, whereby the CP is acquired last (Radford, 1988; Rizzi, 1994; Friedmann et al., 2021; Diercks et al., 2023).
- However, notable **gap** in acquisition data so far → acquisition of *illocutionary complementisers* in Ibero-Romance (Corr, 2016, 2022).
 - Complementisers that do *not* function as a subordinator and instead introduce *non-embedded matrix* clauses, with several **illocutionary functions**.

The development of complementisers

Initial observations

(1) Subordinating complementisers

- a. *Li he dit **que** aquesta tarda vaig a Barcelona* (Catalan)
CL.IO= AUX.1SG told that this afternoon go.1SG to Barcelona

‘I have told him/her that I’m going to Barcelona this afternoon to see a concert in El Liceu.’

- b. *No podía creer **que** hubiesen ganado la lotería* (Spanish)
not can.IMPF.3SG believe that AUX.SUBJ.IMPF.3PL won the lottery

‘He/she couldn’t believe that they’d won the lottery.’

(2) Illocutionary complementisers

- a. *Ai, **que** t’atrapo!* (Catalan)
hey that.EXCL CL.DO=catch.1SG

‘I’m coming to get you!’ (Corr, 2016, p. 88)

- b. *No hagas esto, **que** luego mamá se enfada* (Spanish)
not do.SUBJ.2SG this that.CONJ then mum CL.REFL= get.angry.3SG

‘Don’t do this, because then mum gets angry.’

In a nutshell

1. Introduce *illocutionary* complementisers, including their typology in Ibero-Romance and their syntactic properties.
2. (Selective overview of) approaches to syntactic development.
3. Results of a *corpus study* with CHILDES on 5 Catalan and 5 Spanish children, comparing emergence of illocutionary vs embedding complementisers and testing the approaches' predictions.
4. Preliminary look at Italo-Romance data and its potential insights.

1. Introduction
2. Illocutionary complementisers in Ibero-Romance
3. Theoretical background and hypothesis
4. Corpus study
 - Methodology
 - Results
5. Discussion and theoretical implications
 - Theoretical implications
 - Future directions: first impressions on Italian child data
6. Conclusion
7. Appendix: additional graphs
8. References

2. Illocutionary complementisers in Ibero-Romance

Illocutionary complementisers in Ibero-Romance

Typology and syntactic properties

- A conspicuous property of Ibero-Romance is the use of the complementiser *que* to introduce *matrix* clauses with a range of illocutionary functions (besides its use as a subordinator).
- Four types, largely following (Corr, 2016): *exclamative*, *quotative*, *conjunctive* and *interrogative*.

(3) Exclamative *que*

Alça, **que** ho has llençat tot al terra! (Catalan)
hey **that.EXCL** CL.DO= AUX.2SG throw.PART everything on.the floor

‘Hey! You’ve thrown everything on the floor!’

Illocutionary complementisers in Ibero-Romance

Typology and syntactic properties

- (4) **Quotative *que***. Context: the speaker is asked who had just phoned
*Era Carmen. **Que** me llamaba parar felicitar-me* (Spanish)
was Carmen that.QUOT CL.DO= phone.IMP.F.3SG to congratulate=CL.DO

‘It was Carmen. She phoned me to wish me a happy birthday.’

- (5) **Conjunctive *que***
*No li diguis això a la Paula **que** és un secret* (Catalan)
not CL.IO= tell.SUBJ.2SG this to the Paula that.CONJ is a secret

‘Don’t tell this to Paula because it’s a secret.’

Illocutionary complementisers in Ibero-Romance

Typology and syntactic properties

✍ Corr (2016):

- *Exclamative* and *conjunctive que* in a higher **Speech-Act domain** (dominating CP).
- *Quotative que* in the **CP domain** (see also Corr, 2022, for a revised treatment).

✍ Prieto and Rigau (2007):

- *Interrogative que* is C-based: in Fin.
- *Embedding* complementisers standardly **C-heads** and, in cartographic approaches, typically in Rizzi's (1997) highest Force head.

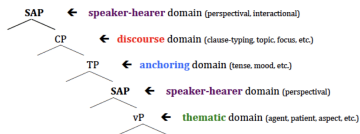


Figure: Clausal structure with speech-act layers (Biberauer, 2018, p. 4).

👍 Like embedding complementisers, illocutionary complementisers are also **structurally very high** elements.

3. Theoretical background and hypothesis

Theoretical background

Approaches to syntactic development

💡 Contrasting the acquisition of these two complementisers is **potentially instructive** in (at least) **two ways**:

- Possible developmental differences between complementisers (speaker-hear-oriented and main-clause vs embedded-clause).
- Brings a new piece of adjudicating evidence for contemporary acquisition hypotheses.

→ Focus here – brief and selective overview of (generative) approaches to syntactic development.

- Bottom-up approaches
- ‘Inward’ approaches

(I set aside Continuity approaches for time considerations)

Theoretical background

Approaches to syntactic development

- **Bottom-up development:** the development of **structurally-lower elements precedes** that of **structurally-higher** ones. Therefore, general acquisition timeline is $vP \rightarrow TP \rightarrow CP$ (i.a., Radford, 1988; Rizzi, 1994; Friedmann et al., 2021; Diercks et al., 2023).
- Arguably the **dominant** perspective in maturational or non-continuity approaches.

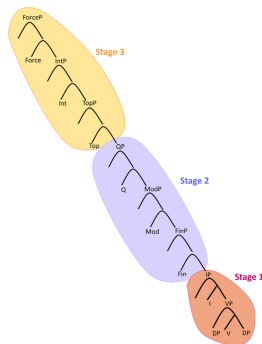


Figure: Stages of acquisition of the clausal domain in the Growing Trees Hypothesis (Friedmann et al., 2021, p. 12)

Theoretical background

Approaches to syntactic development

- **Inward development:** development **begins** in ‘structural **edges**’, meaning the vP domain and (part of) the CP (and, in some approaches, Speech-Act) domain emerge early, before the TP domain (variously entertained; Galasso, 2003; Tsimpli, 2005; van Kampen, 2010; Biberauer and Roberts, 2015; Biberauer, 2019; Heim and Wiltschko, 2021).

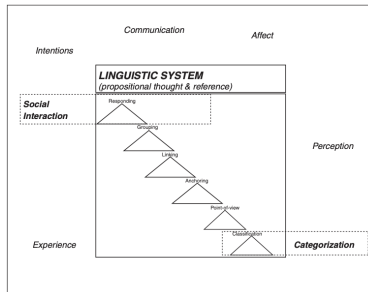


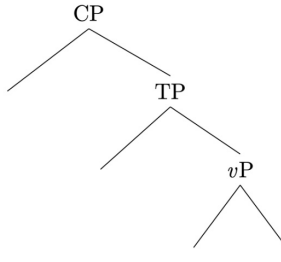
Figure: Bridge Model (Hinzen and Wiltschko, 2022)

Theoretical background

Approaches to syntactic development

Bottom-up

Inwardly



Theoretical background

Approaches to syntactic development

Predictions for the development of complementisers

- **Bottom-up development:** expects **all** elements in the (higher) **left periphery** to emerge at the **very end** of the learning path → **both** kinds of complementisers should emerge substantially **late**.
- **Inward development:** expects a possible **developmental mismatch** → if the CP emerges early, **early production** of (some) **illocutionary complementisers** is anticipated. Subordinating complementisers might develop later as they require knowledge of embedding.

4. Corpus study

Structures analysed

- Summarising the foregoing discussion, the following structures were analysed in every corpus:
 1. **Illocutionary complementisers**
 - a) Exclamative
 - b) Conjunctive
 - c) Quotative
 - d) Interrogative (in Catalan only)
 - e) Adverb/adjective + *que*
 - f) (Topic) *sí/no que* ('yes/no that')
 2. **Subordinating complementisers**
 - a) Complement clauses
 - b) Relative clauses introduced by *que*

Methodology

- Using CLAN, we automatically extracted all occurrences of *que* and their conversational contexts for 10 Catalan and Spanish children in CHILDES (MacWhinney, 2000).

Table: Children studied in the CHILDES database and summary information.

Language	Corpus	Children	Age range	Files analysed	MLU range
Catalan	Serra/Solé	Laura	1;07-4;00	19	1.03-3.47
		Gisela	1;07-4;02	20	1.02-3.51
		Àlvar	1;02-3;01	21	1.07-3.37
		Guillem	1;01-4;00	34	1.01-3.88
	Júlia	Júlia	1;07-2;06	17	1.15-2.74
Spanish	Llinàs/Ojea	Irene	0;11-3;02	40	1.0-4.94
		Yasmin	1;10-2;09	47	1.29-3.21
	Aguado-Orea/Pine	Juan	1;10-2;05	65	1.34-3.39
	Aguirre	Magín	1;07-2;10	29	1.24-3.07
	Vila	Emilio	0;11-4;08	35	1.0-3.23

Results

- This yielded $N = 1318$ utterances from children aged 0;11 to 4;08 that contained a complementiser. 1009 of them (76.6%) corresponded to examples with illocutionary and 309 corresponded to subordinating complementisers (23.4%).

Table: Proportion of use by type of complementiser.

Language	Children	Illocutionary	Embedding
Catalan	Laura	154 (76.2%)	48 (23.8%)
	Gisela	148 (73.6%)	53 (26.4%)
	Àlvar	9 (60%)	6 (40%)
	Guillem	85 (81%)	20 (19%)
	Júlia	3 (75%)	1 (25%)
Spanish	Irene	58 (64.4%)	32 (35.6%)
	Yasmin	36 (85.7%)	6 (14.3%)
	Juan	164 (67.2%)	80 (32.8%)
	Magín	248 (84.1%)	47 (15.9%)
	Emilio	104 (86.7%)	16 (13.3%)
Total		1009 (76.6%)	309 (23.4%)

Results


Order of emergence

- Results reveal two key trends. These regard (i) **order of emergence** and (ii) **syntactic productivity** and **lexical (non)specificity**.

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Order of emergence

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 **First generalisation** → **illocutionary** complementisers typically appear well *before* **embedding** complementisers and never later (in two children only, they emerge simultaneously).

(Full developmental trajectories for every child, file by file, are available in the Appendix)

Table: Emergence of illocutionary and embedding complementisers.

Language	Children	Illocutionary	Embedding
Catalan	Laura	1;10.22 1.15 MLU	3;00.02 2.42 MLU
	Gisela	1;08.24 1.13 MLU	2;08.00 2.61 MLU
	Àlvar	2;02.06 1.84 MLU	2;06.25 1.91 MLU
	Guillem	2;02.28 1.54 MLU	2;11.25 2.44 MLU
	Júlia	2;06.25 2.74 MLU	2;06.25 2.74 MLU
	Irene	1;08.09 1.88 MLU	1;09.10 3.28 MLU
	Yasmin	1;10.08 1.93 MLU	2;05.18 2.47 MLU
	Juan	1;11.11 1.58 MLU	2;01.21 1.77 MLU
Spanish	Magín	1;09.01 1.78 MLU	1;10.00 2.73 MLU
	Emilio	2;04.17 2.18 MLU	2;04.17 2.42 MLU
	Average	1.67 MLU	2.42 MLU

Results

Order of emergence

- On average, the two kinds of complementisers emerged at the following MLU values:

Table: Average and range of MLU values across language groups for the emergence of illocutionary and embedding complementisers.

	Illocutionary	Embedding
Catalan	MLU 1.41 (range 1.13-1.84)	MLU 2.35 (range 1.91-2.61)
Spanish	MLU 1.87 (range 1.58-2.18)	MLU 2.49 (range 1.77-3.28)
Combined	MLU 1.67 (range 1.13-2.18)	MLU 2.42 (range 1.77-3.28)

- A paired-samples t-test confirms that there was a highly statistically significant difference of 0.5456 between the MLU value of emergence of illocutionary ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 0.35$) vs embedding complementisers ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.45$), with the former being much more likely to emerge significantly earlier ($t(17) = 5.6201$, $p < 0.001$).

Results

Order of emergence

(8) Illocutionary complementisers

- a. **Que** *ja* *no* *fa* *mal?*
that.INT already not make.3SG pain (Guillem; MLU 1.99)

‘Does it not hurt anymore?’

- b. *Ai*, **que** *crema!*
ouch that.EXCL burn.3SG (Laura; MLU 1.35)

‘Ouch, it’s burning!’

- c. **Que** *no* *quiero*
that.QUOT not want.1SG (Juan; MLU 1.58)

‘(I said) I don’t want to.’

- d. *Ay*, *no*, **que** *me* *harán* *daño a*
ouch no that.CONJ CL.IO= do.FUT.3PL harm to (Emilio; MLU 2.2)

la *barriga*
the tummy

‘Ouch, no, they’ll hurt my tummy’

Results

Order of emergence

(9) Embedding complementisers

- a. *Una vegada hi havia un nen **que** es* (Júlia; MLU 2.74)
one time CL.LOC= AUX.IMPF.3SG a boy that CL.REFL=

diu Andreu
say.3SG Andreu

‘Once upon a time, there was a boy named Andreu.’

- b. *En una capsa **que** hi ha aquí* (Àlvar; MLU 2.82)
in a box that CL.LOC= AUX.3SG here

‘In a box that’s here.’

- c. *Quiero **que** sea un zapato* (Yasmin; MLU 2.47)
want.1SG that be.SUBJ.3SG a shoe

‘I want it to be a shoe.’

- d. *¿No ves **que** estaba con la pelota?* (Irene; MLU 3.23)
not see.2SG that was with the ball

‘Don’t you see it was next to the ball?’

Results

Frequency and lexical (non)specificity

- ② What's the **nature** of these early illocutionary complementisers (productive, lexically-specific, rote-learned, etc.)?
- A look at the **frequency** and **lexical (non)specificity** of the earliest uses of illocutionary complementisers reveal likely *syntactically productive* knowledge.

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- ❓ What's the **nature** of these early illocutionary complementisers (productive, lexically-specific, rote-learned, etc.)?
- A look at the **frequency** and **lexical (non)specificity** of the earliest uses of illocutionary complementisers reveal likely *syntactically productive* knowledge.
- 👍 Second generalisation: Before embedding complementisers first emerge, early illocutionary complementisers are *neither infrequent nor lexically-specific*.

Table: Types of verbs with illocutionary complementisers before the emergence of embedding complementisers and overall frequency of illocutionary complementisers at this point

	Unacc	Unerg	Trans	Modal	Copula	Impers	Freq
Laura	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	20
Gisela	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		7
Àlvar					✓		1
Guillem	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	11
Irene			✓				1
Yasmin	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	18
Juan	✓	✓	✓		✓		10
Magín	✓		✓				10

Results

Frequency and lexical (non)specificity

Frequency

- Illocutionary complementisers emerge early, *and* they are also frequent in most children before embedding complementisers emerge.

Lexical variety

- For most children, illocutionary complementisers can be found with a **wide range of verb classes**, indicating these complementisers likely do **not form part of rote-learned formulae**.
- Combined together, these points strengthen the hypothesis that illocutionary complementisers are **acquired early**, before embedding complementisers, and in a *productive* manner.

Results

Overall development

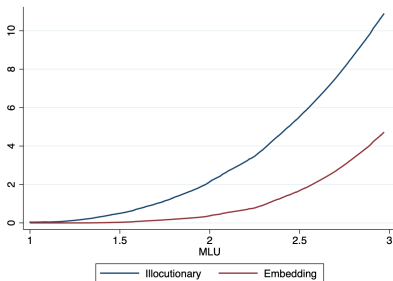


Figure: The development of complementisers in the Catalan and Spanish children.

- Illocutionary complementisers both **emerge earlier** and **develop faster** in frequency than their subordinating counterparts (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicates that the two curves are *not* equal, $D = 2.0000$, $p < .001$)

5. Discussion and theoretical implications

Theoretical implications

- ‘**Developmental mismatch**’ supports common predictions made by approaches that anticipate **early emergence of the CP/SAP domains** (‘inward development’ approaches).
- Early emergence, frequency and lexical variety lend credence to these conclusions.

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- ‘**Developmental mismatch**’ supports common predictions made by approaches that anticipate **early emergence of the CP/SAP domains** (‘inward development’ approaches).
- Early emergence, frequency and lexical variety lend credence to these conclusions.
- Significant consequences for bottom-up approaches (‘late CP’) → *not all complementisers are equally stagnant*.
 - Open question whether the patterns can be reconciled with bottom-up maturation. I preliminarily suggest that bottom-up approaches are not well-suited to account for this data (see also Bosch, 2023, for other empirical evidence).
 - Instead, results point, in a novel way, to an acquisitionally advantaged role of peripheries and edges, interactional language and the CP domain more broadly.

Future directions

First impressions of Italian child data

- Illocutionary complementisers also occur in **Italo-Romance** (in a more restricted form than Ibero-Romance), e.g., CIDs and NIDs generally allow some conjunctive uses of *che*, exclamative *che* (typically with subjunctive mood) and, in some varieties, interrogative *che* (Cruschina and Remberger, 2016).
- 💡 Preliminary look at CHILDES Italian data → **attested relatively early** on *and* in **creative configurations** that are ungrammatical in many Italian varieties and unattested in their parental input (according to 3 Italian informants).

(10) a. ***Che*** *gira* (Martina; 1;11.02, MLU 1.99)
that *stir.3SG*

‘He/she/it stirs (it)’

b. ***Che*** *legge* (Martina; 1;08.02, MLU 1.9)
that *read.3SG*

‘She is reading’ (in response to *Diglielo alla mamma cosa fa la bimba*, ‘tell mum what the child is doing’)

Future directions

First impressions of Italian child data

- (11) a. ***Che*** *ride!* (Martina; 1;11.02, MLU 1.99)
that.EXCL laugh.3SG
‘He/she is laughing!’
- b. ***Che*** *piove* (Martina; 2;01.12, MLU 1.99)
that.CONJ rain.3SG
‘It’s raining’ (in response to *l’ombrello?*, ‘the umbrella?’, asking what someone was doing with an umbrella)
- All examples pre-date the emergence of embedding *che* in Martina (at 2;03.01 and MLU 2.55).

Future directions

First impressions of Italian child data

- This apparent (over)generalisation of interactionally-oriented functions of *che* extends to later developmental stages:

(12) a. *Oh, **che** c'ha un lunghi* (Diana; 2;06.00, MLU 5.53)
oh **that.EXCL** CL.LOC=have.3SG a long.PL

pelosi!

hairy.PL

(lit.) 'Oh, there's a long hairy!' (possibly meaning 'There's (a) long hair(s)!!')

b. ***Che** io ti chiudo la bocca,* (Diana; 2;06.00, MLU 5.53)
that.quot I CL.IO= close.1SG the mouth

sai?

know.2SG

'(I've said) I'll shut your mouth, you know?'

Future directions

First impressions of Italian child data

- Creative, illocutionary ‘inventions’ (overgeneralisations) in child Italian.

Table: Distribution of illocutionary complementisers across grammars

	EXCL	CONJ	QUOT	INT
Catalan	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spanish	✓	✓	✓	
CIDs/NIDs	(✓)	✓		(✓)
SIDs	✓	✓	✓	✓
It. children	✓	✓	✓	✓

- Possible stage in which children ‘maximise’ the use of illocutionary *che*. They exploit a grammatical option which is only occasionally present in the adult input and capitalise on the structural/representational options available in their growing system (reminiscent of the case study on DOM in Belletti, 2022).
 - Similar ‘errors’ may be theoretically elucidating regarding children’s use of speaker-hearer-related items and the formal status of children’s representations.

6. Conclusion

Conclusion

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- 👍 I interpreted them as **favouring 'inward development' approaches** → argument for early emergence of a CP/Speech-Act domain.
- **Further work** needed:
 - Other (Ibero-)Romance varieties (e.g., Portuguese).
 - **Italo-Romance** data shows *initial promise* → early emergence of illocutionary complementisers + (over)generalisation to target-deviant speaker-hearer functions (concordant with several inward development approaches).
 - Comprehension/behavioural studies
 - Alternative explanations for the patterns?

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 - Comprehension/behavioural studies
 - Alternative explanations for the patterns?
- 👍 More broadly, further study on the acquisition of **speaker-hearer** and **discourse-oriented** material will help elucidate the formal make-up of early grammars.

Thank you!

Acknowledgements: Huge thanks to Theresa Biberauer for supervising this side-project during my MPhil. Thanks also to reviewers for 2023 LAGB Annual Meeting, BCGL 16 and Isogloss for very helpful comments, to Adam Ledgeway for useful references, and to Sara Cardullo, Marco Fioratti, Elena Isolani, Leonardo Russo Cardona and Giusy Truncellito for native-speaker judgements. This work was generously supported by St John's College and the Cambridge Trust.

7. Appendix: additional graphs

Appendix

Catalan data

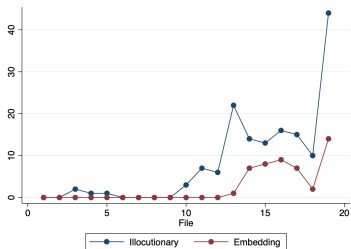


Figure: Laura's development

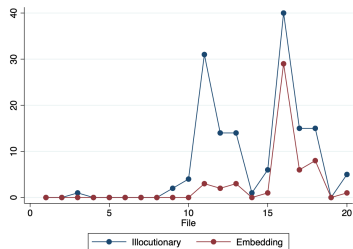


Figure: Gisela's development

Appendix

Catalan data

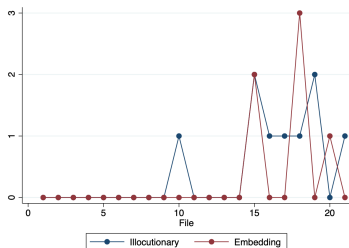


Figure: Àlvar's development

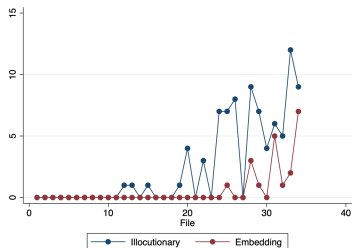


Figure: Guillem's development

Appendix

Catalan data

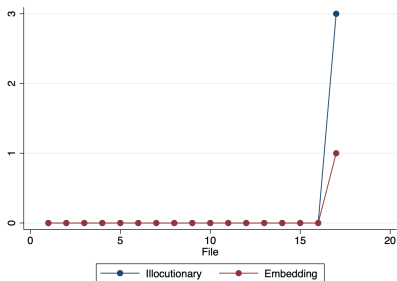


Figure: Júlia's development

Appendix

Spanish data

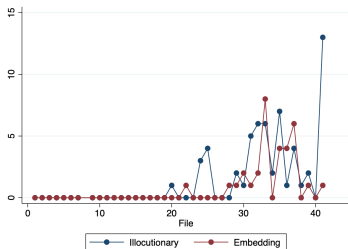


Figure: Irene's development

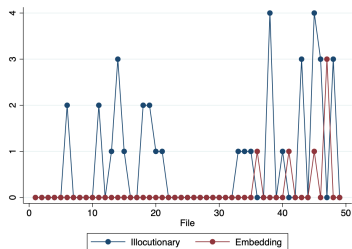


Figure: Yasmin's development

Appendix

Spanish data

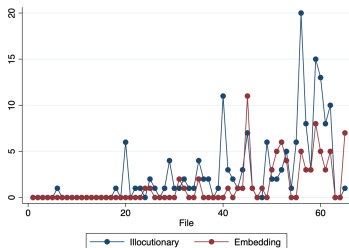


Figure: Juan's development

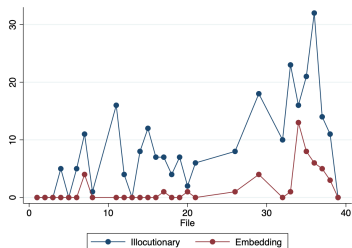


Figure: Magín's development

Appendix

Spanish data

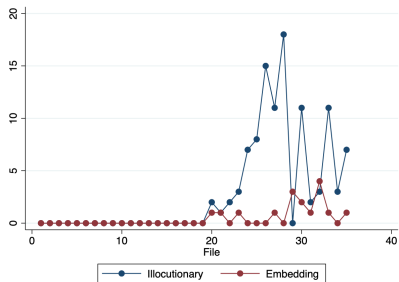


Figure: Emilio's development

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