Article

Ver-Based Evidential Re/Positioning Strategies in Conservative Digital Newspaper Readers' Comments on Controversial Immigration Policies in Spanish

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Abstract: The emergence of political polarization in Europe has intensified divisions among citizens regarding immigration, inequality, and racism. The present paper investigates the use of *ver*-based ("see"-based) evidentiality in positioning and repositioning strategies by conservative Spanish readers of the digital newspapers *ABC* and *La Razón*. The study focuses on their responses to two different controversial measures involving immigrants and refugees taken in by the Spanish government. Such measures relate to the Aquarius (2018) and the Open Arms (2019) incidents. The analysis will be corpus, content-based, and grounded in positioning theory and theories of visual evidential perception. The ultimate aim is to explore the instances of *ver*-based evidentiality introducing positioning and repositioning strategies that are present in the corpus. Subsequently, we will classify and analyze the viewpoints expressed by conservative readers through these *ver*-based evidential markers.

Keywords: evidential perception; re/positioning strategies; digital discourse; immigration policies

1. Introduction

The emergence of affective political polarization in Europe has intensified citizens' divisions on several issues, including immigration, inequality, and racism. Immigration has become a top concern for European citizens, ranked third after their economic situation and governments' finances. Notably, the number of refugees in Europe doubled in 2022 (UNHCR 2022), resulting in instances of inequality that serve as excellent examples of Europe's ambivalence and inability to handle migratory movements efficiently (Arcila-Calderón et al. 2022). Despite being the birthplace of human rights and the concept of political asylum, Europe is demonstrating the arbitrariness of its borders by applying double standards to migration (Gurbuz 2019).

The main turning point was located between January and December 2015. Over one million migrants crossed the European border during that period, with 426,000 seeking asylum. Subsequently, the European Union (EU) implemented controversial measures to counter immigration, resulting in a complex mix of sentiments among European citizens. While some expressed deep resentment toward immigration through protests in Hungary, Slovakia, Belgium, and France, significant support for immigrants was witnessed in certain southern European countries and Germany. From that point onwards, the EU's inability to reach a consensus on how to share the burden of immigrants and asylum seekers has reflected the continuous controversy surrounding migratory movements, leading to the current polarization.

In Spain, this turning point was located in between 2018 and 2019. The Spanish government broke away from Europe and decided to welcome the 630 immigrants and refugees aboard the Aquarius sailboat in 2018. One year later, in 2019, they prevented the entry of the Open Arms ship, which had 150 immigrants and refugees on board. This change in attitude toward managing migratory movements in Spain anticipated the change in the attitude of Spanish society toward immigration experienced in recent years when

situations of hatred and racism, previously only experienced in Northern Europe, began to spread to southern countries such as Spain.

In this context, framed by positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1991; Harré and Van Langenhove 1999b) and theories of visual evidential perception (Aikhenvald 2018), the present paper intends to report on Spanish conservative society's—represented, although it is true that only partially, by conservative newspaper readers' digital comments—uses of markers of evidential perception as discursive strategies to position and reposition themselves in relation to the Aquarius and Open Arms controversial immigration policies. Badarneh and Migdadi (2018) elucidate that readers strive to achieve self-positioning and other-positioning through three main strategies: impoliteness and face attack, invocation of national identity, and invocation of religious identity. At a much more nuanced level, this study contributes to the field by specifically delving into a content analysis of these positioning strategies when manifested through markers of visual evidentiality. In the present paper, these markers are considered as intersubjective linguistic devices for achieving positioning and repositioning within the discourse.

On this basis, the present paper addresses conservative Spanish readers of digital newspapers' uses of *ver*-based ("see-based") evidential positioning and repositioning discursive strategies when discussing the unexpected reception of the Aquarius vessel with 630 immigrants and refugees in June 2018 and the equally unexpected refusal to host the Open Arms vessel with 150 immigrants and refugees in August 2019. To this end, a contrastive corpus-based analysis will be conducted on the contents of all the viewpoints articulated by these readers through markers of *ver*-based evidentiality, in the case of the Aquarius and the Open Arms.

The analysis will be based on a self-compiled corpus of digital comments on controversial immigration policies published in the electronic versions of the Spanish conservative newspapers *ABC* and *La Razón*. Both *ABC* and *La Razón* influence public opinion and political debate in Spain, being respected by readers across the political spectrum. While *ABC* has a broader readership and more diversified coverage, *La Razón*'s editorial line is more clearly defined and closely aligned with the conservative party's agenda. The *ver*-based evidential (re)positioning comments retrieved from the corpus will be manually tagged and analyzed following both Aikhenvald's (2018) classification of evidentiality and a contrastive content-based analysis to facilitate the evaluation of results and the drawing of conclusions. The premises underlying computer-mediated dialogicity will be observed.

Following this introduction, Section 2 presents the theoretical framework for data analysis, and Section 3 describes the methodology. Results and discussion occupy Section 4, and the final section is devoted to the conclusions and limitations of the study.

2. Re/Positioning Discourse on Immigration: Spain and Europe

On Monday, 2 June 2018, Pedro Sánchez was sworn in as Spain's new Prime Minister. This came just one day after public anger over corruption in Rajoy's conservative party triggered a historic vote of no-confidence when Sánchez had promised to address the "pressing social needs" of the country (Sam Jones (2018a), *The Guardian*: 2 June 2018). On Monday, 11 June 2018, President Pedro Sánchez instructed Spain to offer a "safe port" to the Aquarius, a vessel carrying 630 migrants and refugees at sea. The ship had previously been denied entry to Italy by the recently appointed interior minister, Matteo Salvini, similarly to what had occurred in Malta.

The European Union's constituent nations had declared ten days before that they intended to investigate potential paths for establishing new facilities, most likely situated within Africa, where individuals seeking asylum could be subjected to screening—with only those legitimately qualified to do so being permitted to proceed onward to Europe. In this vein, Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen declared that he wanted to set up centers for the reception of migrants and camps for rejected asylum seekers in a European country outside the EU. He said that Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria had been included in discussions about the project, which could be underway within months: "Based on

my discussions with other European leaders and the dialogue that is going on at the official level, it is my expectation that we will be able to take the first step this year" (Marion McGregor (2018), *Infomigrants*: 7 June 2018). Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz confirmed the plans and said talks had already reached an advanced stage: "We suggested a long time ago that it would make sense to offer protection outside of the European Union, where (migrants) receive protection where it is needed but do not have the opportunity to pick the best system in Europe" (Marion McGregor (2018), *Infomigrants*: 7 June 2018). Rasmussen and Kurz said talks were being held directly between several European governments and outside the EU. The European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, said he was not immediately opposed to such an initiative: "I believe the defence against illegal immigration is a European as well as national matter. It is not up to me to be against it" (Barker and Buck 2018, *Financial Times*: 6 June 2018).

In this context, and against all predictions, Sánchez broke away from his European partners and said in a press release made public that it was Spain's "obligation to help avoid a humanitarian catastrophe and offer a safe port to these people, as such meeting with the obligations of International Law" (Oliver Wheaton (2018), *The Independent*: 17 June 2018). He added in a joint interview with *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and *The Frankfurter* that the EU had to view migration as a common problem rather than one that affected only individual member states and called instead for a "shared response to a shared challenge" (Sam Jones (2018b), *The Guardian*: 28 June 2018). The Aquarius incident underscored the international community's need for a coordinated and effective response to provide safe and legal pathways for those seeking European protection and asylum. It also emphasized the need for a comprehensive approach to address the underlying causes of the refugee and migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. The situation has since worsened.

Against all expectations, one year later, on 9 August 2019, the Spanish government denied entry to the Open Arms vessel, operated by a Spanish NGO, after it rescued over 150 individuals off the coast of Libya. Isabel Celaá, the spokesperson for the government and the Minister of Education and Vocational Training at the time, explained that Spain could not be the only European country rescuing and receiving migrants. The vessel had been denied entry to Italian and Maltese ports and faced a prolonged standoff at sea.

As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this article is to examine how the Spanish government's shift in position is reflected in the conservative readers' viewpoints through their use of *ver*-based evidential discursive markers facilitating their positioning and repositioning strategies to react to the two controversial events discussed, as reflected in their digital comments posted in the electronic versions of *ABC* and *La Razón*.

3. Theoretical Background
3.1. Evidential Perception

Direct perception refers to the phenomenon where a perceiver subjectively experiences a perceived entity through their senses, interpreting the stimulus based on their extensive knowledge of the world. In contrast, indirect perception involves the process of inferring and deducing information about a perceived entity. While direct perception occurs without the involvement of mental processes, indirect perception requires cognitive processing. Willems (1983) highlights the significance of deduction and intelligence in cognitive perception, which does not solely rely on external information.

"See" holds the most prominent position among perception verbs, making it the prototypical perception verb in the language system. This observation was made by Anderson in the mid-1980s, emphasizing the significance of vision as a primary mode of perception and pointing to the tendency of perception verbs to generate evidentials. Subsequent studies by scholars such as Wiemer (2010) and Van Bogaert and Colleman (2013) have further supported the prevalence of evidential constructions involving perception verbs, highlighting the pervasive influence of perception on communication (Bašić 2020). Whitt (2010) has also contributed to this field by developing a typology of evidential perception verbs, which encompasses seven complementation patterns and two construction types. As illustrated

in Domínguez Romero (2016, 2020, 2022), these patterns can provide contextual cues and indicate the source of a speaker's knowledge:

- Type I: Perception Verb (PV) + Finite Complement Clause (FCC);
- Type II: PV + WH-Complement Clause;
- Type III: PV + Direct Object (DO) + Non-Finite Verb (NFV);
- Type IV: PV + Prepositional Phrase (PP);
- Type V: PV + Adjective (ADJ);
- Type VI: PV + Conjunction (CONJ) + Clause (C);
- Type VII: PV + Infinitive Copula (IC) + ADJ or Noun (N) or ADJ + N;
- Type VIII: Parentheticals;
- Type IX: Perception Verb External to the Clause.

Approaching this standpoint with cautiousness, as explained by Domínguez Romero and Martín de la Rosa (2017), and in agreement with typological studies that advocate for the encoding of evidentiality through grammatical markers such as verbal affixes and modal auxiliaries (Chafe and Nichols 1986; Willet 1988; De Haan 1999; Aikhenvald 2003, 2004, among others), Boye (2012) contends that perception verbs may only evolve into evidential adverbs or other types of grammatical evidential expressions when a propositional clause accompanies them as their semantic domain (Boye 2012, p. 212). Seeking an intermediary perspective, Marco (2016) and Kotwica (2015, 2017) have revisited Anderson (1986), Boye (2010), Hassler (2010), and Whitt (2010) and established a set of three fundamental conditions that must be met for the Spanish *ver* ("see") to operate with evidential meaning: (i) it expresses a perceptual action in which the speaker participates, which commonly corresponds with the first-person verb forms, since "the perceptual evidence always lies within the speaker" (Whitt 2010, p. 256). According to Anderson (1986, p. 24), "evidentials show the kind of justification for a factual claim which is available to the person making that claim"; (ii) it is part of a factual (*realis*) clause (Anderson 1986); and (iii) it has semantic scope over a proposition rather than a mere "state of affairs" (Boye 2010; Kotwica 2017, p. 90).

In this vein, Aikhenvald (2003, 2004, 2018) distinguishes between Direct (firsthand) and Indirect (non-firsthand) evidentiality, with the latter being further categorized into Inferred and Reported. Within firsthand evidentiality, the author further differentiates between visual perception and other types of perception (such as auditory, olfactory, etc.). For inferential evidentiality, she distinguishes between perception-based inference (as defined by Squartini's "circumstantials" (Squartini 2001, 2008)) and reasoning-based inference or assumption (as defined by Squartini's "generics" and "conjectures" (Squartini 2001, 2008; Willet 1988; Plungian 2001; Diewald and Smirnova 2010, p. 63)).

As mentioned in the introduction, Aikhenvald's (2003, 2004, 2018) typology will be followed to identify and classify the instances of *ver*-based evidential positioning markers retrieved from the Spanish corpus of digital newspaper readers' comments on articles regarding Pedro Sánchez's decision to welcome the Aquarius refugees in June 2018 and deny admission to those from the Open Arms in August 2019.

3.2. Positioning

Positioning theory, as proposed by Davies and Harré (1991) and Harré and Van Langenhove (1999b), is an interactionist approach to analyzing positioning in conversation (Slocum and Van Langenhove 2003). This approach gained prominence in gender studies in the 1980s and has since found wide-ranging applications in fields such as anthropology, education, journalism, midwifery, organizational change, workplace agency, political identity studies, public relations, strategic communication, and conflict resolution.

Harré and Moghaddam (2012) have emphasized that positioning theory concerns itself with how people use discourse to locate themselves and others, with direct moral implications. According to Harré (2012), positioning is the discursive act of placing interlocutors in positions based on the principle that not everyone involved in a social episode has equal access to rights and duties, determining who can use a particular discourse mode.

The nature of these rights and duties depends on the local moral order within which the positioning takes place and the systems of beliefs with which people interpret and manage their lives (Moghaddam and Harré 2010). Thus, positioning theory offers a valuable lens for understanding the complex dynamics of discourse and power in social interactions across various contexts (Badarneh and Migdadi 2018; Tirado and Gálvez 2008).

Harré and Moghaddam (2015) draw from Vygotsky's principle to stress that positioning theory is based on the idea that thinking is not only an individual activity but also a social one. As detailed in Figure 1, the theory involves three key constructs: position, storyline, and illocutionary force (Van Langenhove and Harré 1999).
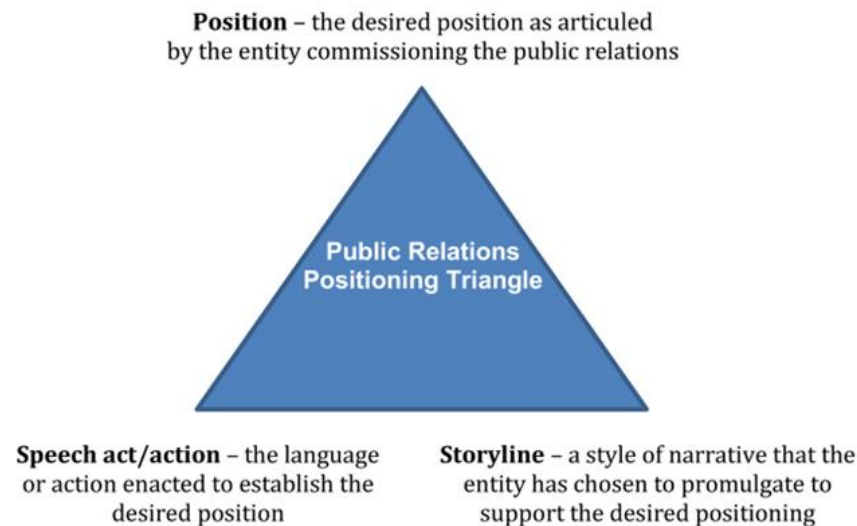

Figure 1. Position, storyline, and illocutionary force positioning triangle (adapted from Van Langenhove and Harré 1999).

According to Wu (2018), a position refers to the allocation of "rights and duties concerning what can legitimately be said and done by whom" (Harré 2005, p. 186), which is determined by social or narrative conventions. Based on these conventions, a storyline develops and is often assumed by interlocutors. Discursive practices concerning the storyline carry illocutionary forces (Van Langenhove and Harré 1999) (Wu 2018, p. 76). As Hirvonen (2016, p. 2) notes, any speech act includes both the speaker's self-positioning and positioning of other speakers and can potentially alter the ongoing storyline. Speech acts have both illocutionary and perlocutionary effects.

Following Hirvonen (2016), the illocutionary force refers to the performative action of the speech act itself (such as questioning, commanding, commenting). In contrast, the perlocutionary effect pertains to the consequences of the illocutionary act (such as answering, denying, or presenting a counterargument) (Van Langenhove and Harré 1999).

Hirvonen (2016) also explains that positioning acts can be classified into first-order, second-order, and third-order positioning. First-order positioning occurs when the positioning act is not contested by others, whereas in second-order positioning, the position is challenged. Third-order positioning involves situating someone outside the current social episode by referring to a previous episode (Hirvonen 2016, p. 2). At the same time, Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) identify four different types of intentional positioning, including deliberate self-positioning, deliberate positioning of others, forced self-positioning, and forced positioning of others. However, they acknowledge that "whenever positioning occurs, several forms of positioning are likely to be occurring simultaneously" (p. 24).

In his study, Wu (2018) concludes that positioning in asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) is multiple, emergent, and contested, challenging preconceived roles and identities. This is evident in the case of positioning in the comment sections of digital newspapers.

3.3. Computer-Mediated Dialogicity

The term computer-mediated discourse (CMD) originally referred to "communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked or mobile computers, where "computers" are defined broadly to include any digital communication device" (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015, p. 127; Kitade 2012). Although the first research on computer-mediated language dates back to the 1980s (Murray 1985, 1988; Severinson Eklundh 1986), scholars did not start taking CMD seriously until the publication of Ferrara, Brunner, and Whittemore's "Interactive written discourse as an emergent genre" in 1991 (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015, p. 127).

In recent decades, and particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technological advances have profoundly impacted communication. Today, computer-mediated interactions often replace traditional face-to-face modes with various forms of video-mediated online communication (Atkinson 2017; Bobkina et al. 2023, 2020; Bobkina and Domínguez Romero 2020; Domínguez Romero and Bobkina 2021; Paradisi et al. 2021). Online digital platforms are widely used for meetings in different environments, and these new forms of communication are changing the rules of traditional communication (Paradisi et al. 2021).

Communication in digital newspaper comment sections is typically asynchronous, with participants' comments saved until other readers or subscribers access the site. Such sections involve one reader posting a message retained in the system until its intended reader(s) examine it later at their convenience. Moreover, most newspaper comment sections are restricted to one-way transmission. In this form, messages are sent as a single unit, with recipients unaware that they are being sent messages. This type of communication is also common in email, text messaging, and social networking systems (Walther et al. 2010).

4. Aims, Corpus Description, and Methodology

The aim of this paper is two-fold:

1. To identify and analyze the expressions of *ver*-based evidential positioning and repositioning strategies used by conservative Spanish readers in digital newspapers regarding the Spanish government's unexpected reception of the Aquarius vessel, carrying 630 immigrants and refugees, in June 2018, as well as their subsequent refusal to host the Open Arms vessel, which had 150 immigrants and refugees on board, in August 2019.
2. To perform a content-based analysis of the viewpoints expressed by conservative Spanish readers through the use of *ver*-based evidential positioning and repositioning strategies, as identified in the case of both the Aquarius and the Open Arms events. The analysis will focus on examining the content and nature of these viewpoints.

To achieve this objective, a contrastive qualitative content-based analysis on a self-compiled corpus of digital comments to opinion articles on the Aquarius and Open Arms controversial immigration policies, as published in the electronic versions of the conservative newspapers *ABC* and *La Razón*, will be conducted. This self-compiled corpus comprises 200,000 words extracted from the digital comment section of opinion articles on Sánchez's unexpected decisions to offer the Aquarius a "safe port" in 2018 and deny admission to the Open Arms in August 2019. The corpus is divided into two parallel subcorpora, each consisting of 100,000 words, covering events related to both the offer of a "safe port" to the Aquarius vessel and the prohibition against the Open Arms vessel docking in a Spanish port. For each of the two events, 50,000 words are selected from *ABC* and 50,000 words from *La Razón*.

The contrastive qualitative corpus and content-based analysis will be conducted in two fundamental phases:

- STAGE 1: Identification and classification of all the evidential markers of visual perception retrieved from the corpus (Aikhenvald 2018; Marco 2016; Kotwica 2015, 2017; Anderson 1986; Boye 2010; Hassler 2010; and Whitt 2010).

- STAGE 2: Content-based analysis of newspaper readers' acts of positioning and repositioning involving their use of evidential markers of visual perception (Davies and Harré 1991; Harré and Van Langenhove 1999a, 1999b; Harré et al. 2009; Moghaddam and Harré 2010; and Harré and Moghaddam 2012).

5. Results and Analysis

In the initial phase of the study, the analysis of the results reveals that Spanish readers of the conservative digital newspapers *ABC* and *La Razón* primarily use the marker of impersonal visual evidence *se ve que* + clause ("It can be seen" + that clause) and the report-based expression *por lo que se ve* ("apparently", "as we can see/it can be seen") as strategies introducing positioning regarding the decision to welcome the immigrants and refugees from the Aquarius, and consolidating positions or repositioning regarding the decision to prevent the arrival of the immigrants and refugees on board the Open Arms just a few months later. Additionally, in this initial phase, the analysis reveals the low frequency of markers of the first-person evidential construction "I see" + Adj. + that clause in both the *ABC* and *La Razón* subcorpora. Furthermore, when markers of first-person visual evidentiality such as *veo* + D.O. and *veo* + that clause ("I see" + D.O. and "I see" + that clause) are used, they are typically employed to elaborate on previously stated positions or to indicate a repositioning in response to the government's change in immigration policies, as observed in the case of the Open Arms. This reflects a certain caution among conservative readers when expressing their viewpoints.

In the second phase of the analysis, a content-based study examines the viewpoints expressed by conservative readers of *ABC* and *La Razón* through visual evidential markers. These markers function as strategies for (re)positioning regarding the decision to welcome immigrants and refugees from the Aquarius, as well as strategies for consolidating of positions or repositioning after the government's decision to prevent the arrival of the Open Arms.

5.1. Stage 1

The analysis of the results retrieved from the corpus reveals that instances of impersonal *ver*-based evidentiality—unveiling examples of inference (examples 1 and 2) and report (example 3)—are slightly more frequent than instances of first-person evidentiality drawing on visual perception, inference, and evaluation.

Spanish conservative readers of *ABC* and *La Razón* show a tendency to use the impersonal *ver*-based evidential construction *se ve que* + clause ("It can be seen" + that clause) to position themselves and make value judgements with regards to Pedro Sánchez's decision to assist the 630 Aquarius migrants and not to assist the 150 Open Arms migrants and asylum seekers. This means that their degree of commitment to the truth of their propositions tends to be medium to low:

- Impersonal—*Inference*.

    se ve que + clause ("It can be seen" + that clause)

    Reasoning-based inference

1. ***Se ve que*** *no es solución sino artificio y chapuza; la ayuda hay que prestarla enseñándoles a organizar sus países, con sus propias gentes y recursos, que tienen muchos pero pésimamente gestionados.* (*ABC*).

    [**It is seen/can be seen that** this is not a complete solution but a half-way, botched one.]

    Perception-based inference

2. ***Se ve que*** *tienen dinero para salir (LR).*

    [**It can be seen that** they have the money to go out.]

- Impersonal—*Report*.

por lo que se ve, *tal y como se ve* ("apparently"/"as we can see/it can be seen")

3.   *¿Alguien sabe por casualidad lo que nos va a costar en Euros el show de hoy…? porque asi,*
      por lo que se ve*, nos va a salir mas caro que el Desembarco de Normandia.* (*ABC*).

   > […because like this, **as we can see/it can be seen**, this will cost more than
   > the "Normandy Landing".]

In the constructions of first-person evidentiality *veo* + D.O. and *veo* + that clause ("I see"
+ D.O. and "I see" + that clause), although less frequently, both more conservative readers
of *La Razón* and less conservative readers of *ABC* make a similar use of evidentiality. This
can be reasoning (example 4), perception (example 5), or evaluation-based evidentiality
(example 6). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the first-person evidential construction
"I see" + Adj. + that clause, where readers express judgments of values that imply a higher
level of commitment to the truth of the statements made, is rarely used by conservative
readers of *ABC* and *La Razón*:

- First-person—*Reasoning-based inference*.

   veo + D.O. ("I see" + D.O).

4.   ***Yo veo*** *clarísimamente <u>el abismo</u> al final del trayecto.* (*ABC*).

   > [**I see** very clearly <u>the abyss</u> at the end of the journey.]

- First-person—*Perception-based inference*.

   veo que + clause ("I see" + that clause).

5.   *Vaya,* ***veo que*** *no dominas muy bien la lectura, pues a mi sin comas ni acentos, ni puntos.*
      (*LR*).

   > [Oh! **I can see** that you are not very literate…no commas, accents or full
   > stops.]

- First-person—*Evaluation*.

   veo + Adj + that clause ("I see" + Adj + that clause).

6.   *Con respecto a las ONGs* ***veo*** *injusto* ***que*** *diga que colaboran.* (*LR*).

   > [Regarding NGOs, **I see** <u>it as unfair to</u> say **that** they collaborate.]

Conservative readers of *ABC* and *La Razón* demonstrate a higher level of engagement
with the ideas expressed in their comments, which translates into a higher use of first-
person markers of visual evidentiality, particularly when those ideas aim to elaborate on
previously stated positions or when they involve a repositioning in positive response to the
government's change in immigration policies, as exemplified by the case of the Open Arms
(examples 5 and 6).

5.2. Stage 2
5.2.1. ABC

Following Pedro Sánchez's unexpected decision to offer a "safe port" to the Aquarius
vessel in June 2018, there was a significant backlash and criticism of his actions. Some
conservative readers used markers of impersonal visual evidentiality and described him as
an irresponsible leader who prioritized personal interests over the needs of Spanish citizens
(examples 7, reasoning-based inference, and 8, report):

7.   *No,* ***lo que se ve*** *es la calaña de Sánchez. Todo le vale para su negocio.*

   > [No, **what it is seen/one can see** is Sánchez's true nature. Anything works
   > for him.]

8.   *¿Alguien sabe por casualidad lo que nos va a costar en Euros el show de hoy…? por que asi,*
      por lo que se ve*, nos va a salir mas caro que el Desembarco de Normandia.*

   > […because like this, **as it is/can be seen**, this will cost more than the "Nor-
   > mandy Landing".]

In opposition to Pedro Sánchez's decision, others argued that the state has a duty to act as a guardian and protect Spain from potentially harmful immigrants. This debate sparked intense controversy, with conflicting viewpoints clashing over the responsibilities of the state and the concept of solidarity. Within this discourse, *ABC* readers emphasized the state's role as a guardian and supported its right to reject abusive immigrants who could pose a threat to the country's safety. However, this perspective faced criticism from those advocating for a more welcoming approach to immigrants. Despite the differing opinions, *ABC* readers generally showed a high commitment and agreed on the position that immigrants who exploit the state to the detriment of Spanish citizens do not deserve the solidarity of the Spanish government (example 9, visual perception-based evidence):

9. *En mi casa somos tres y entran 1000 € al mes y 500 € se van para el alquiler del piso, y con el resto paga luz, agua, comida, gas, ropa…gasolina no, porque no me puedo permitir tener coche (ya quisiera yo tener uno, aunque fuera mas pequeño que alguno de los que **veo que** llevan ellos en muchas ocasiones…*

    > [In my house there are three of us and we earn €1000 a month and €500 are for the rent, and the rest is for electricity, water, food, gas, clothing…not petrol, because I cannot afford to have a car (but I would not mind having one, even if it were smaller than some of the ones that very often **I see that** they drive on many occasions…]

Particularly, *ABC* readers' positions expressed through markers of visual evidentiality after Sánchez offered a "safe port" to the Aquarius vessel in June 2018 (50,000 wds.) were:

- PEDRO SÁNCHEZ IS IRRESPONSIBLE, SEEKING PERSONAL INTEREST;
- THE STATE IS THE GUARDIAN, WITH OBLIGATION TO PROTECT SPAIN FROM IMMIGRANTS. RESPONSIBILITY vs. SOLIDARITY;
- IMMIGRANTS ARE STATE ABUSERS WITH NO RIGHT TO THE SOLIDARITY OF THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT;
- EXPAND THE POSITION THAT THE STATE IS THE GUARDIAN, WITH THE RIGHT NOT TO WELCOME ABUSIVE IMMIGRANTS.

One year later, when Pedro Sánchez denied permission for the Open Arms vessel to arrive at any Spanish port, the debate regarding the state's role as a guardian persisted. However, on this occasion, even those with differing ideologies employed repositioning strategies and acknowledged that the decision made by the progressive government was correct (example 10):

10. *Pues yo que estoy en contra de este gobierno **veo** perfecto este bloqueo.*

    > [Well, though I am really against this government, **I see** this blockade as perfect…]

In this vein, some expanded on the notion that the state is responsible for protecting Spain from abusive immigrants by adding that NGOs may act as human trafficking mafias with no solidarity purpose (examples 11 and 12):

11. *Cuando voy al medico y **veo que** el consultorio está lleno de inmigrantes.*

    > [When I go to the doctor's and **I see that** the surgery is full of immigrants.]

12. *Será el negocio que hacen las ONG rescatando gente, en el programa de Salvados **se veia que** recibian la llamada por móvil, recogían a inmigrantes que se jugaban la vida, y dejaban a la deriva la embarcación con el motor que volvían a recoger los traficantes de personas.*

    > [That must be the NGOs' business when rescuing people, in Salvados **it could be seen/one could see that** they received a mobile call, they picked up the immigrants who were risking their lives, and they left the boat drifting with the engine for the human traffickers.]

In all these cases of reinforcing initial positions or repositioning (examples 10, 11, and 12), there is a higher frequency of first-person markers of direct visual evidence (examples 11 and 12), indicating the readers' strong commitment to the truthfulness of their statements.

Particularly, *ABC* readers' positions toward Sánchez's decision to deny permission for the Open Arms vessel to reach any port in Spain (50,000 wds.) were:

- THE STATE IS THE GUARDIAN, WITH THE OBLIGATION TO PROTECT SPAIN FROM IMMIGRANTS. RESPONSIBILITY vs. SOLIDARITY;
- IMMIGRANTS ARE STATE ABUSERS WITH NO RIGHT TO THE SOLIDARITY OF THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT;
- EXPAND THE POSITION THAT THE STATE IS THE GUARDIAN, WITH THE RIGHT NOT TO WELCOME ABUSIVE IMMIGRANTS;
- NGOs ARE HUMAN TRAFFICKING MAFIAS WITH NO SOLIDARITY PURPOSE.

5.2.2. LA RAZÓN

In the aftermath of Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's offer of a "safe port" to the Aquarius vessel, a heated debate emerged among conservative readers of *La Razón* regarding the role of the state as a guardian and its responsibility to protect Spain from immigrants. The majority of readers took the stance that the state should prioritize the safety and well-being of its citizens over showing solidarity with those seeking asylum. They argued that while the state has an obligation to be responsible, it should not be driven solely by charitable considerations:

13. *España es el país más solidario de Europa por eso se convertirá en el hogar de los refugiados que no son aceptados en Europa. . . , **se ve que** Rajoy no los recibiría nunca porque son unos insolidarios. en cambio, Sánchez sí que es solidario él y todo su equipo de gobierno.*

    > [. . . **it can be seen/one can see that** Rajoy would never welcome them because they are unsupportive to the cause.]

La Razón readers were among the most vocal proponents of this perspective, arguing that immigrants who abuse the system have no right to be welcomed and should be regarded as individuals who exploit the state (examples 14 and 15):

14. *El titular es totalmente falso. Hay imágenes donde **se ve que** los inmigrantes, antes de bajar del barco, cantan y aplauden de alegría. Es imposible estar en shock.*

    > [The headline is totally false. There are images where **it can be seen/one can see that** the immigrants, before they get off the boat, are singing and applauding with joy. They cannot be in shock.]

15. ***Veo** todos los días **que** hay africanos que no trabajan, con buena ropa, buenas zapatillas, aseados, con buenas colonias, con buenos móviles y auriculares, de paseo. Que no nos engañen, porque 50 € a la semana no reciben.*

    > [Every day, **I can see that** there are Africans who don't work, in good clothes, good shoes, clean, wearing good colognes, with good phones and headphones, walking in the streets.]

Furthermore, they fully committed to their positions and asserted that NGOs could be perceived as human trafficking organizations with no genuine solidarity objectives, thus amplifying the discourse of anti-immigration sentiment (examples 16 and 17):

16. *Con respecto a las ONGs **veo** injusto **que** diga que colaboran. Las ONGs están ahí para salvar a la gente, no van de costa a costa trasladando personas. El viaje se inicia en embarcaciones en mal estado, y cuando el motor se para. . . aparecen las ONGs. En este sentido deberían de ser los gobiernos y no las ONGs las que se encargasen de esto.*

    > [Regarding NGOs, **I see/find it** unfair **that** you say that they cooperate.]

17. *. . . . soluciones que **yo veo**: por ejemplo quitar las ayudas desde el estado a las ongs, porque posiblemente alguna de ellas puede estar implicada en las mafias de trafico humano.*

    > [. . . solutions **that I see**: for example, removing the aids from the state to the NGOs, because some of them may be possibly involved in human trafficking mafias.]

Overall, *La Razón* readers' positions expressed through markers of visual evidentiality after Sánchez offered a safe port to the Aquarius vessel (50,000 wds.) were:

- STATE IS THE GUARDIAN WITH OBLIGATION TO PROTECT SPAIN FROM IMMIGRANTS. RESPONSIBILITY vs. SOLIDARITY;
- EXPAND THE POSITION THAT THE STATE IS THE GUARDIAN WITH RIGHT NOT TO WELCOME ABUSIVE IMMIGRANTS;
- IMMIGRANTS ARE STATE ABUSERS WITH NO RIGHT TO THE SOLIDARITY OF THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT;
- NGOs ARE HUMAN TRAFFICKING MAFIAS WITH NO SOLIDARITY PURPOSE;
- EXPAND THE POSITION THAT IMMIGRANTS ARE STATE ABUSERS WITH NO RIGHT TO THE SOLIDARITY OF THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT.

One year later, in response to Sánchez's denial of permission for the Open Arms vessel to dock in any Spanish port, *La Razón* readers continued to expand on their positions that NGOs were acting as human trafficking mafias with no solidarity purpose (example 20):

18. *Hay un video demoledor en el que **se ve** los movimientos de vuestros BARCOS NEGREROS yendo a por cargas a la costa africana y trayendolos 500 millas o mas hasta europa.*

> [There is a devastating video in which **it can be seen/one can see** your SLAVE BOATS going to the African coast for cargoes and taking them 500 miles or more to Europe.]

Moreover, they reinforced their initial position that immigrants are state abusers, to the detriment of Spanish citizens, who do not have a right to the solidarity of the Spanish government (example 21):

19. *Y **vemos** a nuestro lado conciudadanos pasandolo fatal y NO reciben ayuda alguna de las instituciones. Esto se tiene que acabar.*

> [And **we see** our own people having a really rough time and NOT receiving any assistance from the institutions. This cannot go on.]

To recapitulate, *La Razón* readers' positions expressed through markers of visual evidentiality after Sánchez denied permission for the Open Arms vessel to depart (50,000 wds.) were:

- EXPAND THE POSITION THAT NGOs ARE HUMAN TRAFFICKING MAFIAS WITH NO SOLIDARITY PURPOSE;
- EXPAND THE POSITION THAT IMMIGRANTS ARE STATE ABUSERS TO THE DETRIMENT OF SPANISH CITIZENS, WITH NO RIGHT TO THE SOLIDARITY OF THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The study reveals that Spanish conservative readers of *ABC* and *La Razón* used first-person evaluation, impersonal perception and reasoning-based inference, and report-based evidential markers of visual perception in their digital comments to express positioning and repositioning strategies and form value judgments concerning Pedro Sánchez's decision to assist the 630 Aquarius immigrants and asylum seekers but not the 150 aboard the Open Arms.

The analysis of the results suggests that readers preferred using the impersonal evidential construction *se ve que* + clause ("It can be seen" + that clause), expressing a moderate to low degree of commitment to the truth of their claims, to position themselves in relation to the Spanish government's decisions regarding the Aquarius and the Open Arms events. Additionally, the analysis unveils that conservative readers of *ABC* and *La Razón* also used first person visual and inference-based evidential markers (perception and reasoning-based) as discursive strategies to expand their initial acts of positioning or to express a repositioning of their initial ideas. In these cases, they expressed a higher commitment to the viewpoints shared in their digital comments.

These findings suggest that using evidential markers of visual perception is a common practice in newspaper readers' digital discourse to express (inter)subjective positioning and repositioning strategies. In particular, the *ver*-based evidential markers under analysis are deemed to highlight the (inter)subjective dimension, indicating the level of commitment and shared validity with the other readers by the actual conceptualizers (Boye 2012; Nuyts 2017). This hierarchy of subjectivity works as follows: Subjective-explicit 'I see' > Intersubjective-explicit 'We see' > Intersubjective-implicit 'It is seen' (Boye 2012; Marín-Arrese 2015, 2021; Nuyts 2017). Therefore, in line with Domínguez Romero (2022), the present paper leads to the conclusion that visual perceptual experiences can acquire evidential values and express epistemological stance, offering justificatory support to the positioning and repositioning strategies that they introduce in newspaper readers' digital discourse.

Also, differences in perspectives held by readers of *ABC* and *La Razón* have been observed regarding their various positions on opinion articles relating to the Aquarius and the Open Arms events. Specifically, *ABC* readers viewed Pedro Sánchez's decision to welcome immigrants and asylum seekers aboard the Aquarius as irresponsibility and personal gain, failing to fulfill his leadership obligations. These positions deviate from the topic of immigration and seem to constitute a personal attack on Sánchez. Conversely, the comments made by *ABC* readers following the news of the Open Arms mission exclusively revolved around immigration, advocating for a strict stance against immigrants. These readers argued that the government had to safeguard Spain against immigrants and asylum seekers, characterizing them as "state abusers" who do not deserve the solidarity of the Spanish government. Furthermore, the *ABC* readers implied that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were involved in human trafficking and lacked a humanitarian purpose. These comments latter reflect a more resolute focus on immigration and advance a more extreme and polarizing position toward immigrants, asylum seekers, and NGOs.

The differences are not as significant in the case of *La Razón* readers, who have always been critical of immigration. These readers reacted to Sánchez's response to the Aquarius situation by taking a solid stance on the issue of immigration, with the state positioned as a guardian responsible for protecting Spain from immigrants, who were labeled as "state abusers" and denied the right to solidarity. Also, they portrayed NGOs as being involved in human trafficking and lacking a solidarity purpose. This position was further expanded to explicitly deny the right of "abusive" immigrants to be welcomed into Spain. In response to Sánchez's answer to the Open Arms issue, *La Razón* readers shifted the focus exclusively to NGOs, positioning them as human trafficking mafias without any solidarity purpose. They also expanded on the position of immigrants and asylum seekers, describing them as state abusers who are detrimental to Spanish citizens and should not have the right to the solidarity of the Spanish government. This means that they took a strong and negative stance on immigration, and they portrayed immigrants, asylum seekers, and NGOs negatively. It is significant that while initially the readers emphasized the state's duty to protect Spain and the right to deny entry to abusive immigrants, they later focused more on the negative impact of immigrants and the portrayal of NGOs as human trafficking mafias. They did not make direct personal attacks against Sánchez.

While the primary objective of this study was to utilize Spanish readers expressing their opinions in the comment sections of conservative digital newspapers *ABC* and *La Razón* as a sample to reflect the views of conservative Spanish society towards the government's immigration policies, it is important to note that the sample size is significantly restricted. Consequently, it cannot be deemed representative of the entire conservative Spanish population. Therefore, the findings of this study should be considered preliminary and derived from a constrained sample, without undermining the research's validity.

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