

## CONTINUATIVE MEANING AND COMMUNICATIVE DISTANCE. NOTES ON THE USE OF THE SPANISH GERUNDIAL PERIPHRASES WITH *SEGUIR/CONTINUAR/PROSEGUIR*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the differences in distribution between three Spanish verbal periphrases with continuative meaning: gerundial constructions with *seguir*, *continuar* and *proseguir*. Based on quantitative data extracted from two Spanish language corpora, our diachronic and synchronic analysis shows that over time the three auxiliaries have experienced changes in frequency which can be related to text genre and to the concept of communicative immediacy and distance. We argue that in Modern Spanish the whole discourse continuum of communicative immediacy and distance is covered by *continuar* and *seguir*. Contrastively, *proseguir* mainly survives in the prefab *proseguir diciendo*, which also seems to have played a significant role in the original expansion of the periphrasis. Thus, our data suggest that prefabs are not only involved in increasing the use of a grammaticalizing construction, but that they arguably also play an important role in the preservation of a construction whose use has decreased significantly over time.

**KEYWORDS:** Spanish verbal periphrasis, continuative meaning, text genre, discourse continuum, communicative immediacy and distance, prefab.

### VALOR CONTINUATIU I DISTÀNCIA COMUNICATIVA. NOTES SOBRE L'ÚS DE LES PERÍFRASIS VERBALS *SEGUIR/CONTINUAR/PROSEGUIR* + GERUNDI

### RESUM

El present treball examina les diferències de distribució entre tres perífrasis verbals amb significat continuatiu: *seguir/continuar/proseguir* + GER. A partir de dades quantitatives extretes dels corpus electrònics CORDE i CORPES XXI, l'anàlisi diacrònica i sincrònica mostra que, al llarg del temps, els tres auxiliars han experimentat canvis de freqüència que poden relacionar-se amb el gènere textual i amb el concepte d'immediatesa i distància comunicatives. S'argumenta que en l'espanyol modern *continuar* i *seguir* cobreixen el continu discursiu d'immediatesa i distància comunicatives completament. En canvi, *proseguir* sobreviu, principalment, en la unitat convencionalitzada *proseguir diciendo*, que també sembla haver exercit un paper destacat en l'expansió original de la perífrasi. Així doncs, les dades suggereixen que les unitats convencionalitzada no sols estan implicades en l'increment de l'ús d'una construcció en vies de gramaticalització, sinó que probablement també exerceixen un paper important en la preservació d'una construcció l'ús de la qual ha disminuït significativament amb el pas del temps.

**PARAULES CLAU:** perífrasi verbal, valor continuatiu, gènere textual, continu discursiu, immediatesa i distància comunicatives, unitat convencionalitzada.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The Spanish language is known for its frequent use of verbal periphrases, pluriverbal expressions composed of a finite verb form that serves as an auxiliary, and an auxiliated non-finite verb form, i.e. an infinitive, gerund or past participle (see, for example, Bravo & García Fernández 2016; Fernández de Castro 1999; García Fernández 2006; Gómez Torrego 1999; Olbertz 1998, 2023; RAE-ASALE 2010: 2105-2222; Squartini 1998; Yllera 1999). Examples (1) to (3) are instances of periphrases with an infinitive, a gerund and a past participle respectively.

- (1) Isabel, contestando a Andrea, que *acaba de quejarse* de la sosería del matrimonio, le rebate, escandalizada, tal rebeldía. (*Usos amorosos del dieciocho en España*, Carmen Martín Gaité, España, 1972, CORDE)  
'Responding to Andrea, who has just complained about the dullness of the marriage, Isabel rebukes such rebellion, scandalized.'
- (2) Parece que la policía la *estuvo interrogando*, fue por lo de los estudiantes. (*Últimas tardes con Teresa*, Juan Marsé, España, 1966, CORDE)  
'It seems that the police were questioning her, it was because of the students.'
- (3) Ahora *anda metido* en un estudio sobre la justicia o la injusticia del latifundio. (*La mortaja*, Miguel Delibes, España, 1948-1963, CORDE)  
'He is now involved in a study on the justice or injustice of landownership.'

In these syntactic constructions the finite and the non-finite verb constitute a single unit with a unitary meaning that conveys the aspectual and modality features of the event or state denoted by the non-finite verb. They are the outcome of the grammaticalization of a formerly lexical verb in conjunction with a non-finite verb form.

In this paper we will focus on three periphrases with continuative meaning, namely gerund constructions with the auxiliaries *seguir*, *continuar* and *proseguir* (hereafter *seguir* + GER, *continuar* + GER, *proseguir* + GER, respectively). They are used to indicate that an action started, or a quality existed, at some point before the moment of speaking or temporal reference point and will continue after this moment. In this sense, these periphrases highlight the prolongation of the event (Fernández de Castro 1999: 125, and passim; García Fernández 2006: 236-238; Olbertz 1998: 166-167, 335-336; 2023: 388; RAE-ASALE 2010: 2209-2211; Squartini 1998: 140; Yllera 1999: 3421).

*Seguir* + GER, *continuar* + GER and *proseguir* + GER are normally treated together in syntactic-semantic descriptions, especially the first two ones, because of their similarities (Fernández de Castro 1999: 125, 250-254; Fernández Martín 2019: 68-69; García Fernández 2006: 236-238; Hamplová 1968: 222; Luna Traill 1980: 209; Olbertz 1998: 166-167; 2023: 384, 388; Sedano 2000: 262, 269; Spaulding

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<sup>1</sup> Este artículo se enmarca en la investigación realizada en el proyecto *Diccionario histórico de las perífrasis verbales del español. Gramática, pragmática y discurso (III). Perífrasis formadas a partir de verbos superléxicos y de movimiento* (PID2019-105415RB-I00).

1925-1928: 262-265; Yllera 1980: 83, 1999: 3421-3422). Consider examples (4) to (6). In (4), the speaker uses the verb *seguir* to indicate that he was already performing the action of “working” (*trabajando*) before the moment of speaking and that he will continue the action after this moment. Likewise, *continuar* in (5) implies that Concha was already “combing” (*peinando*) her daughter’s hair when she looked away from the speaker and that she continued the combing afterwards. Finally, in example (6), the use of *proseguir* implies that the lieutenant was already “smoking” (*fumando*) before and continued to smoke at the moment of speaking.

- (4) Mira, si quieres, nos casamos así y yo *seguiré trabajando* ... para los dos. (*Niebla*, Miguel de Unamuno, España, 1914, CORDE)  
'Look, if you want to, we get married like this and I will keep on working ... for the two of us.'
- (5) Concha apartó sus ojos de los míos para no reírse y *continuó peinando* la destrenzada cabellera de su hija. (*Sonata de otoño*, Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, España, 1902, CORDE)  
'Concha looked away to stop herself from laughing and she continued combing the unbraided hair of her daughter.'
- (6) El Teniente *prosigue fumando* despacio sin contestar. (*La zanja*, Alfonso Grosso, España, 1961, CORDE)  
'The Lieutenant continues slowly smoking without replying.'

Previous studies on verbal periphrases report that *seguir* + GER and *continuar* + GER are synonymous, without specifying the exact nature of this synonymy. However, the same studies also point to differences in frequency and stylistic properties between the two periphrases. For example, *seguir* + GER is very frequent in contemporary Spanish. It is more widespread than *continuar* + GER and is preferred in colloquial speech (Hamplová 1968: 222; Olbertz 1998: 166-167; Sedano 2000: 262, 269; Yllera 1999: 3421-3422). *Continuar* + GER, on the other hand, is more formal than *seguir* + GER (García Fernández 2006: 237) and is considered a literary variant (Spaulding 1925-1928: 265). Luna Traill suggests that *continuar* and, particularly, *proseguir* belong to a more careful speech style (Luna Traill 1980: 209). At the same time, Spaulding acknowledges that *proseguir* emphasizes the forward movement of the action, rather than the continuation (Spaulding 1925-1928: 264), implying, therefore, that *proseguir* is not entirely synonymous with *seguir* and *continuar*.

There seems to be a fair amount of consensus among authors with regard to the semantic and syntactic status of *seguir* + GER and *continuar* + GER. Few studies, however, mention *proseguir*, although the reason for this lack of attention is unclear. It might be that they do not consider *proseguir* + GER a periphrasis or that they just overlook the construction because of its relatively low frequency. In this sense, García Fernández (2006: 237) constitutes an exception, since in this study the periphrastic character of *proseguir* is explicitly denied on the basis of a number of syntactical tests involving its use with meteorological verbs, in passive constructions and in contexts of focalization. Fernández Martín (2019: 68),

Spaulding (1925-1928: 262-265) and Yllera (1980: 83, 1999: 3421-3422), on the other hand, do classify *proseguir* + GER as periphrastic, although they recognize that its use is very limited and literary in nature.

From a historical linguistic point of view, it seems logical to incorporate *proseguir* + GER in the same group as *seguir* and *continuar*, because, as stated by Keniston, *proseguir* is the only auxiliary that is used in conjunction with a gerund in the sixteenth century to express the continuation of the action (Keniston 1937: 469). Thus, Keniston's observation suggests that in earlier times *proseguir* used to have a similar meaning and function to modern-day *seguir* and *continuar*.

The observed differences in frequency and stylistic properties between the three periphrases in Modern Spanish raise the following questions:

- Does the current distribution reflect an earlier pattern or has it changed over time?
- How can the difference(s) in frequency be accounted for?

We think that these research questions are pertinent since, as far as we are aware, there are no studies that treat the diachronic development of the three auxiliaries together and focus on their similarities and differences. With the present paper, therefore, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the expression of continuative meaning in Modern Spanish.

In the following sections we will address these questions starting with a brief discussion of the origins of the three auxiliaries (section 2). Next, we will outline the main characteristics of the corpora that were used to collect the data on which our analysis is based (section 3). Subsequently, in section 4 we will discuss the existence of a discourse continuum and the concept of communicative immediacy and distance as elaborated by Koch and Oesterreicher (2007: 20-42). In addition, we will propose a classification of different text genres based on this concept of immediacy and distance. In section 5 a diachronic overview is given of the distribution of the three periphrases, while in section 6 the distribution of the constructions is examined across different text genres with the aim of finding significant patterns of use that might be explained on the basis of communicative immediacy and distance. In section 7 we will focus on another parameter relevant to the concept of immediacy and distance, the distribution of the periphrases in both physical and online written versus oral communication. Section 8 deals with the status of *proseguir* + GER in Modern Spanish. The paper closes in section 9 with a discussion of the results and some concluding remarks.

## 2. THE ORIGIN OF THE THREE PERIPHRASES

The auxiliaries *seguir*, *continuar* and *proseguir* find their origin in Latin, corresponding respectively to SEQUI ('to follow', 'to come after'), CONTINUARE ('to join', 'to make continuous') and PROSEQUI ('to follow', 'to accompany'). Note that the last verb is composed of the preposition PRO ('before') and the aforementioned Latin verb SEQUI. As an independent verb *seguir* is found in

Spanish documents from the thirteenth century onwards, with both the meaning of 'to follow' and 'to continue' (examples 7 and 8) (see Nieuwenhuijsen accepted).

- (7) E quando ellos fuxieren non los *seguire* & dexar los he foyr. (*Poridat de poridades* Anonymus, España, c 1250, CORDE)  
'And when they should flee, I will not follow them and let them flee.'
- (8) Que les den a comer por tres días carne de cabrón o de algazel con leche d'asna; e si mejoraren por ello, entenderán que es de tísica, e conuiene que je lo *sigan* fasta que sanen. (*Moamín. Libro de los animales que cazan*, Abraham de Toledo, España, 1250, CORDE)  
'That they be given to eat goat or antelope meat with donkey's milk for three days; and if they would get better because of it, they will understand that it is from consumption (tuberculosis), and they should continue it until they are healed.'

The first reliable cases of *proseguir* appear in the fourteenth century (example 10) sharing the two meanings of 'to follow' and 'to continue' with *seguir* (examples 9 and 10).<sup>2</sup> The first testimonies of *continuar* also date from the thirteenth century (example 11) and preserve their Latin sense of continuity. This leads to a situation in which nowadays the three verbs share the continuative meaning (examples 12 to 14). In addition, in Modern Spanish *seguir* also maintains its original Latin meaning of 'to follow' and 'to come after' (15).

- (9) & apres el consul cuytadament *proseguia* los çiudadinos qui eran defuera & prendiolos. (*Gran crónica de España, I*, Juan Hernández de Heredia, España, 1385, CORDE)  
'And afterwards the consul fiercely pursued the citizens who were outside & he captured them.'
- (10) Yo fago fin aqui del present volumen por que en los que se siguen yo *prosigo* et tracte complidament todas las otras cosas. (*Traducción de la Historia contra paganos, de Orosio*, Juan Hernández de Heredia, España, 1376-1396, CORDE)  
'I end the present volume here so that in the following ones I may continue and fully deal with all the other things.'
- (11) & este quinto libro *continuasse* con el quarto libro porque amos fablan de las nacencias de los omnes. (*Judizios de las estrellas*, Anonymus, España, 1254-1260, CORDE)  
'And this fifth book continues the fourth book because they both speak of the origins of mankind.'
- (12) La fiesta *siguió* en casa pero yo me retiré. (*Crónica de un adosado*, María Teresa Hernández Díaz, España, 2010, CORPES XXI)  
'The party continued at home but I left.'
- (13) Al cierre de esta edición, el debate *continuaba* y también las dudas sobre si Andalucía se abstendría o rechazaría el plan por insuficiente. (*El Diario Vasco*, España, 31-01-2001, CORPES XXI)  
'At the closure of this edition, the debate continued and also the doubts as to whether Andalusia would abstain or reject the plan as insufficient.'

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<sup>2</sup> CORDE provides two thirteenth century cases of *proseguir*. However, they appear in texts whose dating, according to Rodríguez Molina and Octavio de Toledo (2017), is (highly) unreliable. For this reason, we have not taken them in account.

- (14) Luego, como si yo ya no estuviera allí, *prosiguió* con lo que estaba haciendo. (*Bueyes y rosas dormían*, Cristina Sánchez-Andrade, España, 2001, CORPES XXI)  
'Then, as if I were no longer there, she continued with what she was doing.'
- (15) Ignacio sube a su habitación, el perro le *sigue* con ganas de jugar. (*Volverás*, Antonio Chavarrías, España, 2002, CORPES XXI)  
'Ignacio goes up to his room, the dog follows him wanting to play.'

### 3. CORPUS

Our study of the diachronic distribution of the three gerund constructions is based on quantitative data taken from the Spanish language corpus CORDE. The corpus was created by the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language (Real Academia Española). It contains some 250 million words and covers the period from around 800 to 1975 (see RAE banco de datos, CORDE). Although it includes texts from different Spanish-speaking countries, for the present purpose we focused only on texts written by Spanish peninsular authors, because it is known from other studies that verbal periphrases are susceptible to diatopic variation (see, for example, Nieuwenhuijsen 2019, Sedano 2000). Furthermore, the history of writing in the Latin-American countries only started in the sixteenth century, and given that we want to examine the diachronic evolution of the constructions, Peninsular Spanish texts provide far greater diachronic scope.

The CORDE corpus also allows us to distinguish between different text genres. The corpus is divided into fiction texts that account for 44 % of the total amount of texts and non-fiction texts that make up the remaining 56 % of the database. The fiction texts distinguish between prose and poetry and the subcategories lyric, narrative and drama. The non-fiction category includes didactic, religious, historical, society, scientific and legal prose (for details see RAE, the manual of the corpus).

We collected a dataset of  $n = 9\,233$  examples, 5 736 cases of *seguir* + GER, 2 702 cases of *continuar* + GER and 795 cases of *proseguir* + GER. Thus, *seguir* represents 62 % of the total number of cases, *continuar* 29 % and *proseguir* 9 %.<sup>3</sup> Since the CORDE corpus is not lemmatized, the data were extracted by introducing different forms of each verb followed by a gerund using wildcards to collect all the relevant occurrences. Afterwards, every case was analysed manually in order to exclude tokens that did not correspond to one of the three periphrases.

In addition, we collected a dataset of cases of *continuar/proseguir/seguir* + GER extracted from CORPES XXI, a corpus also created by the Real Academia Española. The corpus is still growing but at the date of access it comprised some 350 million

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<sup>3</sup> The *Cancionero castellano del s. XV de la Biblioteca Estense de Módena*, VV.AA., 1400-1500, contains 17 cases of *continuar* + GER. Since they all appear in rubrics, which might be of a different date than the poems themselves, we decided to exclude them from the corpus. The same holds for three cases in the *Cancionero castellano de París* (PN5). BNP Esp. 227, VV.AA., 1430-1470, which also appear in the rubrics.

words and contained language utterances produced in the period 2001-2021 (version 0.94, see RAE banco de datos, CORPES XXI). The lemmatization of this corpus offers the possibility of conducting more specific searches than in the CORDE corpus. We searched for strings consisting of the three verb headwords followed by a gerund. Moreover, one of the assets of this present-day Spanish language corpus is that it allows us to distinguish between written and oral communication, and thus provides an additional parameter with which to analyze the distribution of the three auxiliaries in Modern Spanish. Non-peninsular data were filtered out to keep the dataset comparable with the diachronic dataset. These selection criteria rendered a total of  $n = 55.536$  examples, 48.992 cases of *seguir* + GER, 6 432 cases of *continuar* + GER and 112 cases of *proseguir* + GER. This dataset contains a larger representation of *seguir* + GER (88.2 %) compared to the CORDE corpus, and lower percentages for both *continuar* + GER (11.6 %) and *proseguir* + GER (0.2 %).

#### 4. COMMUNICATIVE IMMEDIACY AND DISTANCE

The communicative conditions and verbalization strategies that are involved in the production of a text were visualized by Koch and Oesterreicher (2007: 20-42; also see Koch 1999; Oesterreicher 1996, 1997, 2004) in a model of communicative immediacy and distance (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

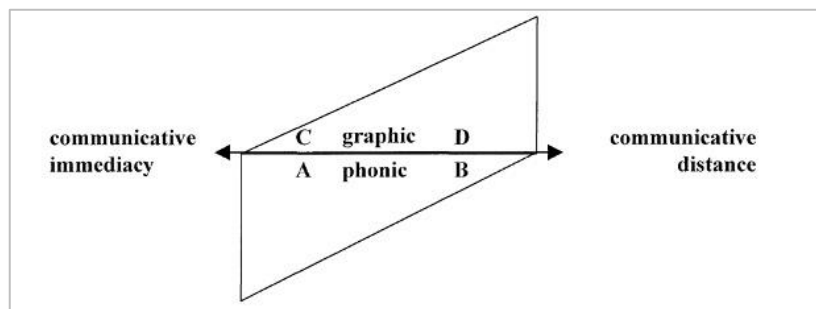


FIGURE 1: Model of communicative immediacy and distance (Koch 1999: 400).

The model takes into account two dimensions, the medium (graphic or phonic) and the conception of linguistic discourse, i.e., the communicative strategies that are employed. These can be divided in two general modes (written and spoken). Whereas the medium entails a dichotomy whose members exclude each other mutually (a graphic code cannot be phonic at the same time), the written and spoken conceptions give rise to a continuum that ranges from the purely spoken to the purely written conception of linguistic discourse. In this

<sup>4</sup> The model of communicative immediacy and distance is sometimes presented slightly differently and more elaborated in other publications (see, for example, Oesterreicher 2004: 735 or Koch & Oesterreicher 2012: 444). It should be noted, however, that the double distinction between medium and mode is always maintained. For the sake of clarity, in this paper we use a rather simple version of the model, discussed in Koch (1999).

way, the two extreme poles of the continuum correspond to forms of communication or linguistic utterances that imply a maximum degree of communicative distance (written mode) and of communicative immediacy (spoken mode) respectively. Interestingly, in spite of the previously mentioned dichotomy in the medium of realization, transpositions from one medium to the other are possible, e.g., an interview that is written down or a letter read out aloud.

The communicative discourse scale principally refers to linguistic utterances that respond to particular social and professional needs, such as telephone conversations, private letters, sermons, academic conferences or legal contracts. (Oesterreicher 1996, 1997; Koch & Oesterreicher 2007: 34-35, 2012: 444). The CORDE corpus, on which the diachronic analysis for this paper is based, focusses on the larger category of text genres. We might generalize and argue that, since academic conferences and legal contracts are assigned to the far end of the discourse continuum, where communicative distance is maximally present, the corresponding text genres of scientific prose and legal prose are also expected to reflect a high degree of communicative distance and can be characterized as formal. However, since both scientific prose and legal prose incorporate different subtypes of texts, such a generalization probably lacks justification.

In order to concretize the concept of communicative immediacy, Koch (1999: 400) identifies a number of parameters, related to the participants involved, the temporal and spatial setting in which the discourse takes place and the topic. According to these parameters, communicative immediacy is grounded in the deictic immediacy of time (“now”) and place (“here”) and in the presence of the participants that directly participate in the discourse, which takes place in a familiar, informal setting (“you” familiar or intimate, and “I”). Hence, if we take the presence of concrete words that refer to these parameters of temporal, spatial and participant deixis as a measure of the degree of immediacy of the text genres in which they appear, we will be able to make more specific statements about the relative position of these genres on the discourse scale of communicative immediacy and distance.

Accordingly, we calculated the presence of the Spanish words that correspond to the concepts of temporal (*ahora*, ‘now’) and spatial (*aquí*, ‘here’) immediacy, as well as the Spanish forms of address that refer to the first person singular (*yo*, ‘I’) and to the second person singular familiar (*tú*, ‘you’ familiar) for each text genre of the CORDE corpus. However, since Spanish is a pro-drop language, in which the overt expression of subject pronouns is constrained by specific contextual factors (RAE-ASALE 2010: 2547-2559), which are not necessarily the same for all text genres, we selected the corresponding object pronouns *me* (‘me’) and *te* (‘you’ familiar), since their use is not affected by the type of contextual constraints imposed on subject pronouns. We focused on the period of the eighteenth to the twentieth century, because, as we will see in the next



section, there are hardly any instances of the three periphrases before the eighteenth century and we are particularly interested in the relationship between the usage of the three constructions and text genre. In addition, we limited the search to peninsular texts, for the reasons we explained in section 3. Since the number of texts within each text genre and the number of words per text varies, Figure 2 expresses the relative frequency of the mentioned deictic adverbs and pronouns under scrutiny per ten thousand words.<sup>5</sup> For convenience of presentation, we have ordered the genres by their overall scores in the twentieth century, from the highest score on the left side to the lowest score on the right side of the figure. Supposing a high score indicates a high degree of communicative immediacy, whereas a low score indicates a low degree of communicative immediacy, i.e., a high degree of distance, the horizontal axis of Figure 2 reflects the discourse continuum of immediacy and distance, where the left end corresponds to maximum immediacy and the right end to maximum distance.

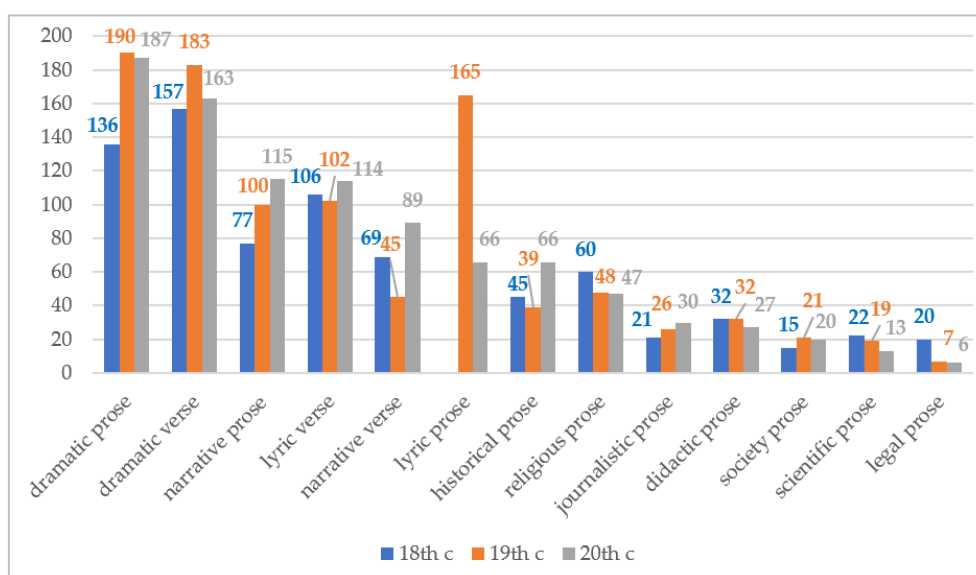


FIGURE 2: Relative frequency of words of immediacy (*aquí-ahora-me-te*) per ten thousand words per text genre and per century in peninsular documents (data extracted from CORDE).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> All other figures express the results per million words. For Figure 2 we used a larger measure (ten thousand words) because otherwise the numbers would be very big.

<sup>6</sup> We included forms with a capital or small letter, as well as the unaccented spelling variant of *aquí*: *aqui*. Besides *ahora*, its lexical variant *agora* was also taken into account. For all calculations we checked that documents were included only once. This is particularly relevant for documents whose date is expressed as a period of time starting in one century and ending in the following century. For example, this is the case with Ignacio García Malo, whose *Voz de la naturaleza* is dated between 1787 and 1803. We also checked that texts were not included in more than one text genre. If that were the case, we assigned them to only one text genre. In all figures decimals are rounded to whole numbers unless the outcome is smaller than 1. In case the decimal is 0.5, it is rounded up. It should be noted that the words of immediacy in the three genres in verse (dramatic, lyric and narrative verse) might not only be used in order to create communicative immediacy but also for reasons of rhythm and rhyme. As for lyric prose, CORDE contains no eighteenth-century

If we assume that the references to deictic immediacy and familiar participants directly involved in the discourse are indicators of the degree of communicative immediacy of the corresponding text genre, the results of Figure 2 leave no doubt as to the clear differences that exist between the analysed genres. At the left end of the scale, we find dramatic prose and verse, which have very high frequencies across all three centuries, thus reflecting their communicative immediacy. On the other end of the scale scientific and legal prose stand out with the lowest scores in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, endorsing the idea that these are genres in which communicative distance is inherent. Moreover, within the fictional genres, the highest scores after dramatic prose and verse are found in narrative prose, while in the group of non-fictional genres historical and religious prose present the highest scores.

In the following sections, where we discuss the distribution of the three auxiliaries that are involved in the expression of continuity, the ordering of the text genres according to the presence of words of immediacy will serve to interpret possible differences in distribution across the text genres.

## 5. A DIACHRONIC OVERVIEW

In this section we will briefly discuss the distribution of the three auxiliaries in conjunction with the gerund across the centuries. We calculated the relative frequencies for all three constructions for each century in which we found at least one example of either *seguir*, *continuar* or *proseguir* + GER. Figure 3 displays the relevant data.

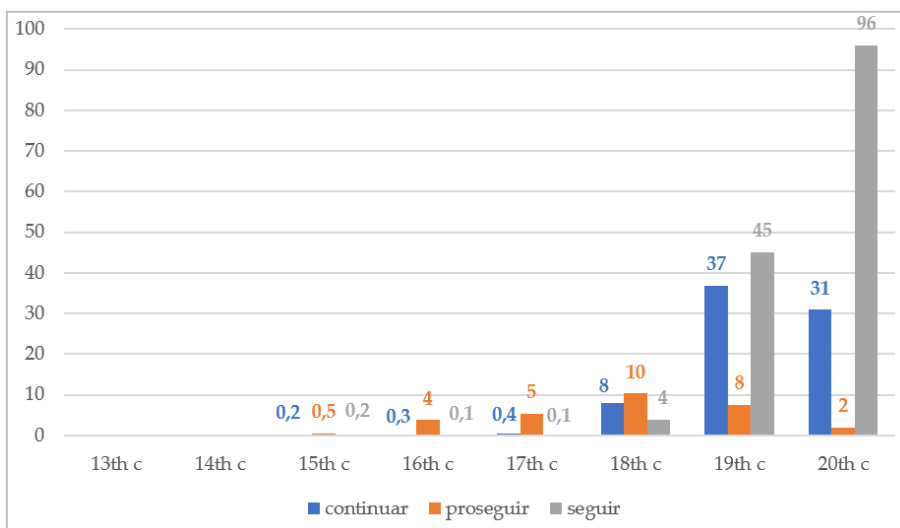


FIGURE 3: Relative frequency of *continuar/proseguir/seguir* + GER per million words per century in peninsular documents (data extracted from CORDE).

documents for this genre. Besides, the very high score of lyric prose in the nineteenth century is based on only one text.

The results reveal that the earliest cases of *continuar/proseguir/seguir* + GER date from the fifteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Our data also make clear that, whereas *proseguir* is the most frequent verb in this type of construction before the nineteenth century, *continuar* begins to emerge as a competitor of *proseguir* in the eighteenth century. Another radical change is also observed from the nineteenth century onwards; the use of *seguir* rises dramatically and replaces *continuar* and *proseguir* as the dominant auxiliary. Although the results suggest that *continuar* also starts to expand its use in the eighteenth century, it is *seguir* that takes the lead in the twentieth century, occupying almost three quarters of the functional niche of the continuative meaning.

## 6. TEXT GENRES

As far as we are aware, there are no in-depth studies yet that treat the three periphrases together, and authors that do mention the constructions only make general statements about the stylistic properties of the auxiliaries (see section 1). Therefore, we will take a closer look at the text genres in which the periphrases appear in order to clarify whether the distribution of the constructions and their stylistic properties can be linked to their use in particular text genres. Figure 4 offers a panchronic overview of the three periphrases as they appear in the different text genres distinguished in CORDE.

*Seguir* is the most frequent verb in all text genres, except for legal prose, which favours *continuar* (10 occurrences per million words), and narrative verse, in which *proseguir* and *seguir* show the same frequency. In narrative verse, however, the overall presence of the three constructions is limited, with a total of 31 occurrences.

On the one hand, it is not surprising that *seguir* displays the highest frequency in almost all text genres, given its high overall frequency in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the other hand, the fact that *continuar* is

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<sup>7</sup> Prior to the fifteenth century our corpus does testify the existence of combinations of *seguir* and a gerund, but in these cases the construction has not yet acquired its continuative meaning. Instead, *seguir* still maintains its lexical meaning of ‘to follow’ and frequently has its own complement, while the gerund expresses the way in which the action is carried out, as the following example illustrates:

- (i) & lo pusieron a cauallo & lo *siguian aquexando* el cauallo con correas que andas mas ayna.  
(Juan Fernández de Heredia, *Gran crónica de España*, I, 1385, CORDE)  
‘And they placed him on a horse and they followed him spurring the horse with belts so that it would run faster.’

This type of usage is also found in Modern Spanish:

- (ii) Yo las *seguí arrastrando* el echarpe por el suelo. (Elena Quiroga, *Escribo tu nombre*, 1965, CORDE)  
‘I followed them dragging the scarf across the floor.’

Obviously, since they are not instances of the periphrasis, they were filtered out when the sample set was checked manually.

much more frequent than *seguir* in legal prose might explain why previous studies claim that *continuar* is more formal and *seguir* is favoured in colloquial speech. According to the results in Figure 2, legal prose falls at the end of the continuum where communicative distance is greatest, and it is characterized as a very formal text genre with a highly elaborated architecture (Aguirrezabala & Fanduzzi 2012; López Izquierdo 2008: 428; Oesterreicher 1996, 2004). Even so, in view of our results, it seems more accurate to say that *seguir* is the unmarked auxiliary, which, in principle, makes it suitable for every discourse, including colloquial speech.

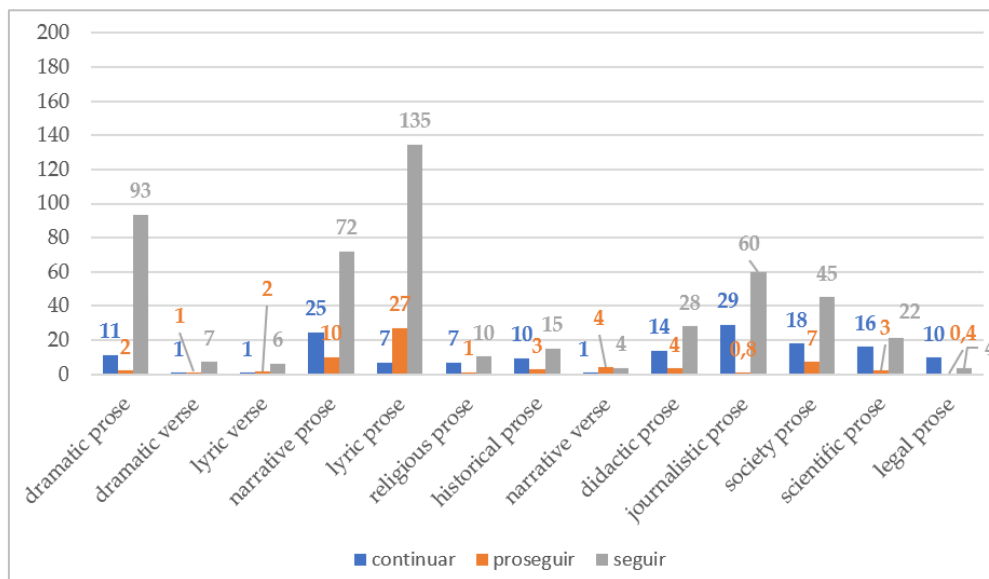


FIGURE 4: Relative frequency of *continuar/proseguir/seguir* + GER per million words per text genre in peninsular documents (data extracted from CORDE).

In line with this, one might expect that the more formal *continuar* would also be preferred in scientific prose, which is also formal in nature. As we will see below, this used to be the case until the twentieth century, when *seguir* consolidated its status as the most frequent and unmarked auxiliary.

Taking into account that *proseguir* outnumbered both *continuar* and *seguir* until the nineteenth century when the use of *seguir* started to grow substantially at the cost of *proseguir*, and *continuar* initially kept pace with the expansion of *seguir*, the data in Figure 4 may be too rough and obscure differences between the use of the three verbs in the various text genres per century. Therefore, we will examine the parameter of text genre separately in each century, starting with the eighteenth century, because before that time the absolute numbers of *seguir*, and partially also those of *continuar*, are too low to make a feasible and reliable subdivision of text genres.<sup>8</sup> For this same reason, we will only consider genres in

<sup>8</sup> Merging of the data before the eighteenth century shows that from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century *proseguir* is dominant in every text genre except in journalistic prose, where *continuar* prevails, due to four occurrences in this period, against one instance of *seguir* and none of *proseguir*.

which one of the three auxiliaries has at least ten tokens. The results are reported in Figures 5 to 7.

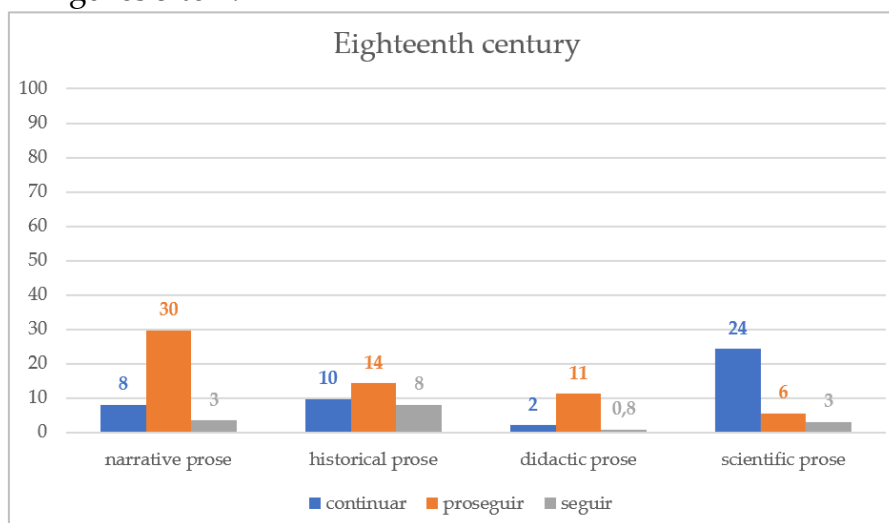


FIGURE 5: Relative frequency of *continuar/proseguir/seguir* + GER in the eighteenth century per million words per text genre in peninsular documents (data extracted from CORDE).

We already saw in Figure 3 that *proseguir* is overall the most common verb to express continuity of the action indicated by the gerund in the eighteenth century. The data in Figure 5 demonstrate that this auxiliary has the highest frequency in narrative, historical and didactic prose, three genres allocated at different points of the discourse continuum of immediacy and distance (see Figure 2). The distribution of the three auxiliaries in scientific prose stands out, bearing in mind that it is considered a highly elaborated, learned text genre (Oesterreicher 1996, 2004; Sevilla Muñoz & Sevilla Muñoz 2003) and that in the eighteenth century it already involves relatively low communicative immediacy (see Figure 2). Interestingly, the fact that it is *continuar* that predominates in scientific prose in this century suggests that *proseguir* might have been less formal in character in the eighteenth century than in Modern Spanish, or at least less formal than *continuar*. Moreover, while *seguir* still has a very low overall frequency in the eighteenth century (see Figure 3), it is rather frequent in historical prose, although the differences in frequency between the three verbs are less marked in this genre than in the other genres.

We may infer from the data visualized in Figure 6 that *proseguir* definitely loses ground in the nineteenth century, because it is no longer dominant in any of the text genres. On the other hand, *continuar* clearly gains in importance in this century. It is not only the most frequent auxiliary in scientific prose, as in the previous century, but also in, religious, historical, journalistic and legal prose. As already mentioned, legal prose belongs to the right end of the discourse continuum where communicative distance is high, while the other genres, according to Figure 2, are less distant. In turn, *seguir* also becomes quite competitive in this century. It is predominant in dramatic prose and verse and in

narrative, didactic and society prose. Noteworthy, some of these genres received high scores on the parameter of immediacy in Figure 2.

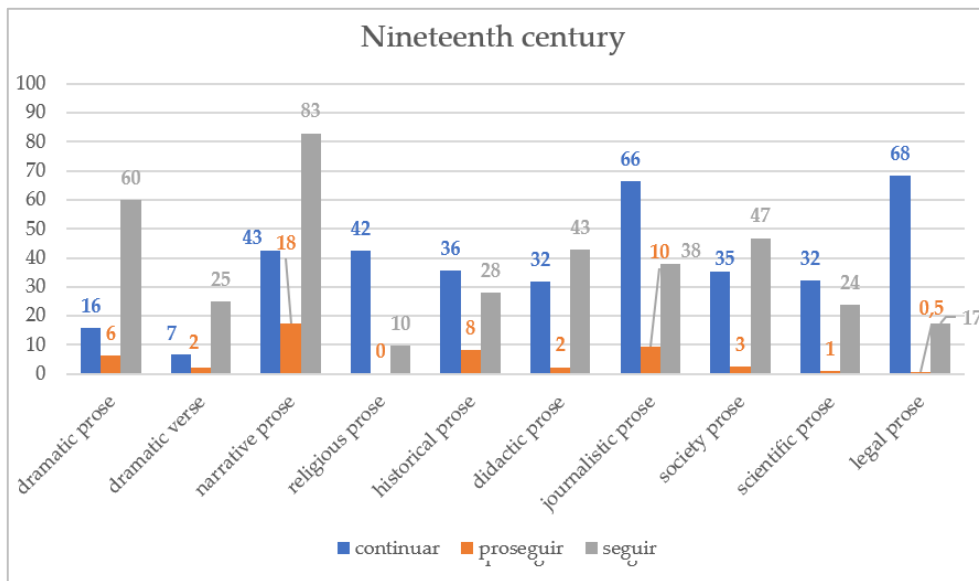


FIGURE 6: Relative frequency of *continuar/proseguir/seguir* + GER in the nineteenth century per million words per text genre in peninsular documents (data extracted from CORDE).

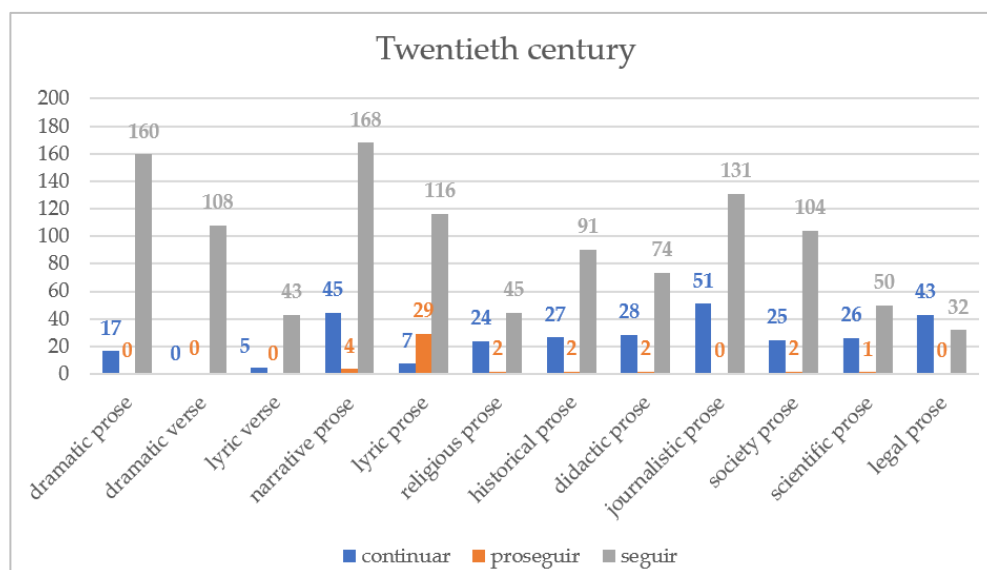


FIGURE 7: Relative frequency of *continuar/proseguir/seguir* + GER in the twentieth century per million words per text genre in peninsular documents (data extracted from CORDE).

The results of Figure 7 leave no doubt as to the prevalence of *seguir* in the twentieth century. The verb is dominant in all text genres, except for legal prose. As we already saw in Figure 3, the use of *proseguir* is extremely limited in the twentieth century. It appears in narrative, lyric, religious, historical, didactic, society and scientific prose but generally with fewer than 10 instances in each genre type, except for narrative prose with a total of 41 occurrences and scientific prose with 14 occurrences overall. Note that in lyric prose *proseguir* reaches a frequency of 29 occurrences per million words, but this is based on only 4 actual cases. *Continuar*, in turn, has lost its relevance in almost all text genres in which

it prevailed in the previous century and only predominates in legal prose (43 occurrences per million words).

From the data collected from CORDE we may tentatively conclude that in the eighteenth century *proseguir* is the most common verb to express the meaning of continuity in conjunction with a gerund and dominates in a number of text genres (narrative, historical and didactic prose) situated at different points of the discourse scale. In this century, *seguir* starts to appear in historical prose, while *continuar* is introduced in the highly distant genre of scientific prose. The nineteenth century is clearly a period of competition, in which *continuar* and *seguir* extend their use through a number of different text genres that involve different degrees of communicative immediacy and distance. Remarkably, two of the genres (legal and scientific prose), in which *continuar* is the preferred verb, are clearly marked for communicative distance. As a consequence, the use of *proseguir* definitely drops off in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, twentieth century Spanish attests the overall success of *seguir*. This occurs, not only at the cost of *proseguir*, a development that had already started in the nineteenth century, but also at the cost of *continuar*, which is now only dominant in the communicatively distant genre of legal prose. These results lead us to conclude that in the twentieth century *seguir* is the unmarked auxiliary preferred in all text genres, independently of the degree of communicative immediacy or distance they imply, except for legal prose, which is the domain of *continuar*.

In the next section we will further explore the relationship between the distribution of the three auxiliaries and the concept of communicative immediacy and distance.

## 7. COMMUNICATIVE IMMEDIACY AND DISTANCE IN WRITTEN AND SPOKEN LANGUAGE

Until now we have concentrated on linguistic utterances transmitted graphically and pertaining to the written mode. Yet, if we want to further test the idea that in contemporary language *continuar* is used in discourse that maintains a high degree of communicative distance, whereas *seguir*, as the unmarked form, in principle covers the whole discourse scale, it would be interesting to examine the possible influence of the channel by which a message is communicated on the choice of the auxiliary in the gerund construction with continuative meaning. Therefore, we will use the parameter of mode, i.e., the distinction between spoken and written language, given that spoken language is strongly related to communicative immediacy, while in written communication a certain degree of communicative distance is inherent (Oesterreicher 1997, Koch & Oesterreicher 2012). For this purpose, we compiled a second dataset extracted from the corpus CORPES XXI, since CORDE only contains written texts. Apart from this, an additional advantage of CORPES XXI is that it covers the twenty-first century, whereas CORDE only contains texts prior to 1976.

The spoken section of CORPES XXI includes a variety of recordings and transcriptions of debates, speeches, interviews and press conferences, among others. Within the broad category of written communication, it is possible to make a subdivision based on whether the documents are traditional written texts on paper or web documents. Generally speaking, web documents are different from other written documents insofar as they are much more unpredictable and individualized than paper documents (Santini 2006: 67). It should be noted, however, that they constitute a relatively heterogeneous category, depending on whether they are based on paper models or have been created exclusively for the digital medium. As Kanaris and Stamatatos state:

Webpages form new kinds of genre, taking advantage of a new communication medium and different type of interaction with the receiver. Some of the webpage genres are variants of traditional genres (e.g., online newspapers) while others have no antecedents in paper documents (e.g., personal home pages, blogs). (Kanaris & Stamatatos 2009: 499)

CORPES XXI distinguishes between different kinds of web documents, and blogs are the most common type of web documents in the corpus. Therefore, for the present discussion we will compare this particular kind of web documents with paper documents and spoken utterances. Paper documents and blogs together with the spoken mode can be seen as different manifestations of the discourse continuum, where paper documents are assumed to possess the lowest degree of immediacy, spoken utterances have the highest degree of immediacy, and blogs hold a position in between.

Given this characterization, we anticipate finding differences in the distribution of the three periphrases. We expect *continuar*, on the one hand, to have a higher frequency in paper documents than in spoken language and, on the other hand, a lower frequency in blogs than in paper documents, but its frequency in blogs will be higher than in spoken language. *Seguir*, in turn, is likely to exhibit the opposite pattern, with increasing frequencies from paper documents to blogs and spoken language, although we expect it to show high frequencies in all three types of utterances because of its supposedly unmarked status. As far as *proseguir* is concerned, in view of its limited distribution in the twentieth century CORDE data, we do not expect to find clear differences in frequency between the three categories. The results are given in Figure 8.

The results in Figure 8 confirm our expectation that *continuar* + GER is used far more frequently in paper documents (47 times per million words) than in spoken language (28). In addition, its frequency in blogs is higher (38) than in spoken utterances but lower in comparison to its frequency in paper documents. *Seguir* is very common in all three types of utterances, but as expected, its frequency increases as communicative immediacy increases (345 occurrences per million words in paper documents, 399 in blogs and 572 in spoken language).



Not surprisingly, *proseguir* is almost non-existent in paper documents, blogs and spoken language (0.8, 0.2 and 0.6 times per million words respectively).

The results in Figure 8, thus, support the claim that *continuar* is likely to be used in communicative situations of distance rather than of immediacy, whereas *seguir* confirms its status of unmarked verb, although it has a particularly high frequency in spoken language. In a broader sense, the results also confirm the idea that communicative immediacy and distance play a role in the choice of one of the three verbs in periphrases with a continuative meaning.

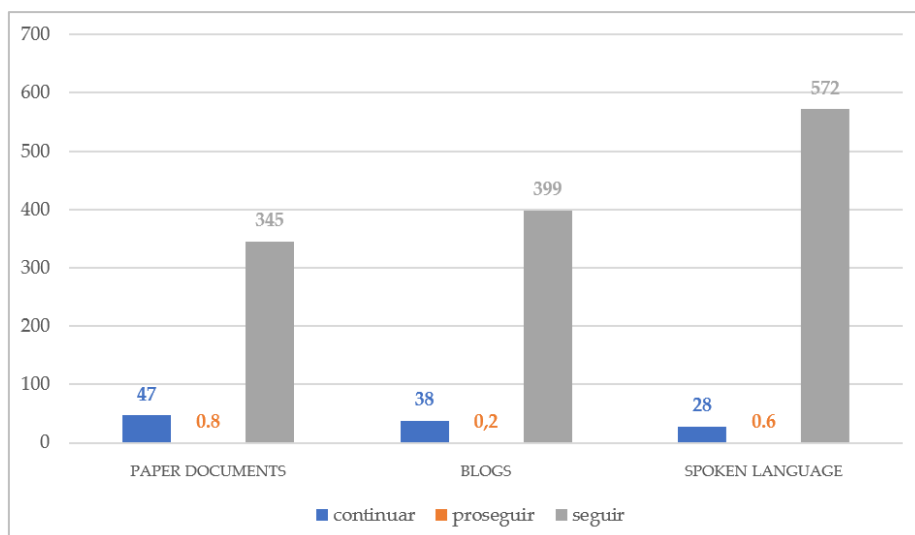


FIGURE 8: Relative frequency of *continuar/proseguir/seguir* + GER per million words per mode (written/spoken) and type of written document in peninsular Spanish (data extracted from CORPES XXI).

## 8. PROSEGUIR + GER IN MODERN SPANISH

As Figure 3 made clear, *proseguir* was the most common of the three auxiliaries until the nineteenth century. Yet in principle, our description of the discourse continuum leaves no space for the auxiliary *proseguir*, since *continuar* is associated specifically with communicative distance, while *seguir* is the unmarked auxiliary that covers the whole discourse spectrum, but is the non-preferred option in contexts of high communicative distance. In Modern Spanish, rather than being associated with a particular text genre, *proseguir* has become mainly restricted to the context in which it has always been particularly common, i.e., in conjunction with the verb *decir*, rendering *proseguir diciendo*. In the CORDE corpus, *proseguir diciendo* covers 38 % (302/795) of all the cases with *proseguir*, whereas for *continuar diciendo* the overall percentage is 3.5 % (94/2,702) and for *seguir diciendo* 2 % (115/5,736). In Figure 9 we have combined the data from CORDE (fifteenth to twentieth century) on the three periphrases with the gerund *diciendo* with the corresponding data from CORPES XXI (twenty-first century). The percentages express the relative frequency of *diciendo* compared to other auxiliated verbs

selected by the three auxiliaries. For convenience of presentation, we display the data for each auxiliary in a separate figure.

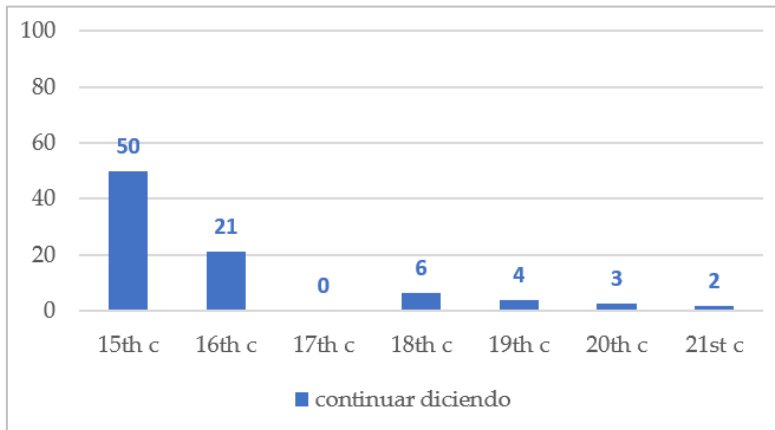


FIGURE 9a: Relative frequency of *continuar diciendo* compared to other instances of *continuar* + GER in percentage per century in peninsular documents (data extracted from CORDE and CORPES XXI).

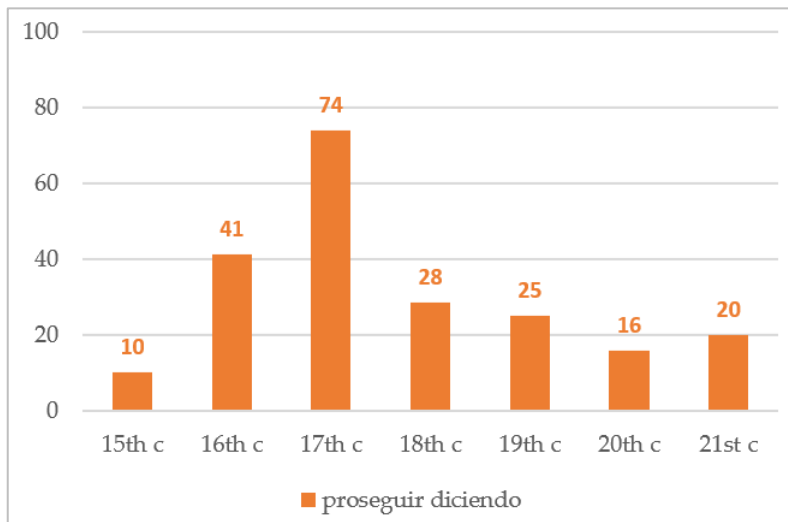


FIGURE 9b: Relative frequency of *proseguir diciendo* compared to other instances of *proseguir* + GER in percentage per century in peninsular documents (data extracted from CORDE and CORPES XXI).

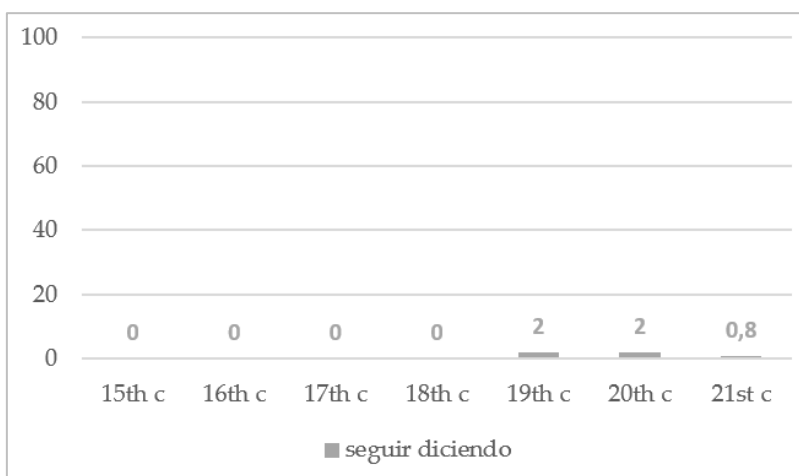


FIGURE 9c: Relative frequency of *seguir diciendo* compared to other instances of *seguir* + GER in percentage per century in peninsular documents (data extracted from CORDE and CORPES XXI).

A comparison of the three figures shows that, whereas *proseguir diciendo* constitutes a substantial part of all the instances of *proseguir* + GER in almost every century, for *continuar* this is only the case in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. The results in these two centuries, however, are based on two and three occurrences of *diciendo* respectively, against four and fourteen instances of *continuar* + GER overall. As far as *seguir* is concerned, this auxiliary hardly selects the gerund of *decir* compared to other verbs, not even in contemporary Spanish, when *seguir* is the preferred auxiliary to express the continuation of the action. Looking at the twenty-first century, there is still a strong connection between *diciendo* and the auxiliary *proseguir*, since this gerund covers 20 % of all the cases of *proseguir* + GER in this century. By contrast, *continuar diciendo* only accounts for 2 % of all the cases of the corresponding periphrasis, while *seguir diciendo* is only found in 0.8 % of the cases of *seguir* + GER in the twenty-first century.

Therefore, we might infer that *proseguir diciendo* has become a conventionalized multi-word combination, a prefab, which is defined by Erman and Warren as

a combination of at least two words favoured by native speakers in preference to an alternative combination which could have been equivalent had there been no conventionalization. (Erman & Warren 2000: 31)

Bybee and Torres Cacoullos (2009) stipulate an important role for these conventionalized multi-word strings in the process of grammaticalization. According to the authors, prefabs are the driving force behind the increased use of the general construction they relate to and serve as the locus of extension of the construction.<sup>9</sup> It goes beyond the scope of this paper to offer a thorough analysis of the grammaticalization of *proseguir* + GER but, considering the data, it is likely that *proseguir diciendo* played a similar role in the expansion of *proseguir* + GER from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

## 9. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our first research question addressed the distribution of the three auxiliaries used in the gerundial periphrasis with continuative meaning, and specifically whether these constructions have experienced changes in frequency over time.

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<sup>9</sup> In the context of verbal periphrases, the prefab *andar buscando*, a specific instance of the frequentative periphrasis *andar* + GER, was the driving force behind the grammaticalization and subsequent spread of this periphrasis (Nieuwenhuijsen 2020).

<sup>10</sup> A first indication of the presumably important role of *proseguir diciendo* in the expansion of *proseguir* + GER might be found in the relative frequencies of the three auxiliaries with *diciendo*. Excluding the fifteenth century, in which only two instances of *continuar diciendo* and one instance of *proseguir diciendo* were documented, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century *proseguir diciendo* turns out to be the most frequent of the three possible combinations (*continuar/proseguir/seguir diciendo*), with percentages of 95 %, 100 %, 85 % and 46 % respectively.

Our quantitative analysis revealed that from the fifteenth century onwards, when the first instances of the periphrasis appeared in texts, it was mainly *proseguir* that served as an auxiliary for the construction. Moreover, the present-day pattern of use, according to which *seguir* + GER is far more frequent (96 occurrences per million words) than the two other verbs (*continuar* 31 occurrences per million words, *proseguir* 2), dates back to the nineteenth century when both *continuar* and *seguir* started to extend their use at the cost of *proseguir*.

Subsequently, we raised the question of how the differences in frequency could be accounted for. We argued that the current distribution of the three auxiliaries is linked to the concept of communicative immediacy and distance. When *continuar* + GER appeared as a periphrasis in the eighteenth century, it was prevalent in scientific prose, a text genre that is characterized by a high degree of communicative distance. Although there is evidence that the auxiliary moved away from the far end of the discourse continuum in the nineteenth century and extended its use into genres which involve less communicative distance, in Modern Spanish *continuar* is only dominant in the highly distant genre of legal prose, while *seguir* has managed to encroach into all other genres. This outcome endorses the characterization of *continuar* as a rather formal form, which is also confirmed by the fact that it is relatively more frequent in written documents than in spoken utterances and more frequent in texts on paper than in weblogs. Our analysis supports the claim, made by previous authors, that *seguir* is more colloquial in nature than *continuar*, since we found a higher frequency of *seguir* in spoken language than in weblogs and in written paper documents. However, the present analysis also provides evidence that *seguir* is not just a colloquial variant. It expanded its usage along the discourse continuum from a certain degree of communicative distance to communicative immediacy and ended up becoming the unmarked form to convey continuative meaning.

*Proseguir* started in the fifteenth century as the most common auxiliary in gerundial constructions with continuative meaning, which suggests that the verb must have been less formal or literary than it is nowadays. Over the centuries, as it came to be perceived increasingly as a formal and literary verb, it became less eligible for text genres with a relative high degree of immediacy, thus drifting away from more speech-like written utterances, which came to be the domain of *seguir*. In present-day Spanish, the overall use of the periphrasis *proseguir* + GER is very low. The prefab *proseguir diciendo*, which from the sixteenth century onwards has always been the most frequent combination compared to other gerunds that occur with this auxiliary, presumably played a crucial role in the expansion of the periphrasis until the eighteenth century. Interestingly, this conventionalized multi-word string seems to be playing an equally important role in Modern Spanish, since nowadays it is largely responsible for the preservation of *proseguir* + GER. Thus, our findings arguably indicate that across the lifespan of a construction a prefab might not only be pivotal at the start, when

it promotes the productivity of the construction, but also at the end, when it preserves a construction that is under threat of being lost from the language.

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