

The pragmatic meaning of *(que) es/era broma* in Spanish: a discourse marker?

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to contribute to the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characterization of the expression “*(que) es/era broma*” (meaning ‘just kidding’), considering the extent to which it can be understood as a Spanish discursive marker (Portolés and Martín Zorraquino, 1999). The data are drawn from the Diachronic Corpus of Spanish, the Corpus of 21st Century Spanish, and the Reference Corpus of Current Spanish. The analysis focuses on the expression’s degree of formal fixation, the previous situational, contextual, or textual referent, its position in the discourse (preceding pause, postponement, periphery), its mitigating value, and its pragmatic meaning. We observed that its postponed appearance after a sentence, discourse, or situation modifies the whole previous expression, creating a new meaning and inviting the recipient to reconsider the information within a *non-bona fide* frame, one which mitigates its initial literal impact. An updating of the information is thus produced, and this new content is re-framed as humorous (Attardo, 1991, 2001 and 2006; Attardo and Raskin, 1991) and involves attenuation or mitigation.

Keywords: discourse markers; reformulation; periphery; attenuation/mitigation; pragmatics.

1. Characterization of *(que) es/era broma* as a discourse marker

In recent decades, a pragmatic approach to the study of Spanish discourse markers has been common (Briz, 1994; Briz, Pons Bordería and Portolés, 2008; Cortés, 1995a, 1995b, 1998; Jørgensen, 2019; Jørgensen and Martínez, 2007; Martín and Portolés, 1999; Nadal *et al.*, 2016; Pons Bordería, 2000; Portolés, 1993, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2016). According to the definition proposed by Martín Zorraquino and Portolés Lázaro (1999, 4057), discourse markers are

invariable linguistic units, do not have a syntactic function within the framework of sentence predication – they are, hence, marginal elements – but have a similar

role within the ongoing discourse: that of guiding the inferences made during communication, this according to their different morphosyntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties¹.

In the following sections (*que*) *era/es broma* ('just kidding') will be characterized as a discursive marker of Peninsular Spanish, and its pragmatic meaning will be analysed and discussed using material from three corpora.

The classification of discourse markers provided by Martín Zorraquino and Portolés Lázaro (1999) does not include (*que*) *era/es broma* in any of its five types, these being: information structurers, connectors, reformulators, argumentative operators and conversational markers. It seems that it has a rectifying meaning, because it reorients the interpretation towards a comic framework. It might also be interpreted as counter-argumentative connector, since it links two elements of the discourse, the second of these suppressing or mitigating some inference that arises from the first. However, (*que*) *era/es broma* usually occurs in sentence-final position and we found no examples of it followed by explaining expressions.

Given that it includes a conjugated verb (*es/era*), the phrase does not adopt the usual form of a conjunction or connector, although we might bear in mind that "discursive connectors can be coordinating or subordinating conjunctions, but also adverbs, interjections or voices that belong to other paradigms" (RAE, NGLÉ, § 30.12b).

(*Que*) *era/es broma* fulfils entirely the following identifying characteristics of discourse markers (Martín Zorraquino and Portolés, 1999):

- a. They have prosodic limits in the form of clauses (intonation or commas).
- b. They cannot receive specifiers or adjuncts. There are certain linguistic forms/contexts that often accompany (*que*) *era/es broma*, such as *oye, que no, que era broma, ¿eh?* Yet, one of the formal restrictions indicating its high degree of fixation is its appearance with inserted elements (e.g.: **que es/ era mera broma*).
- c. They usually relate to the entire sentence or the sequence of constituents they affect, and hence they do not depend syntactically on the core verb of the sentence. So, (*que*) *es/era broma* can anaphorically affect elements of discourse at various lexical and syntagmatic levels: specific lexical units, sentences, sequences. Then, it carries the meaning 'que *eso* que acabo de decir (*o una parte de eso*) ha de ser tomado en broma y no en serio' (lit. 'that which I've just said (or part of it) has to be taken jokingly and not seriously').
- d. They behave autonomously and can appear independently and alone in a single speech turn, with the omitted subject (*eso*) *era broma* referring to something mentioned in the immediately preceding context.

1 All translations our own.

- e. Semantically, they do not carry a referential or denotative meaning, but rather a procedural one: they guide the inferences that must be made from the two discursive members that they connect (Blakemore, 1987, 2002; Portolés, 1998, 2004).

The following characteristics of discourse markers are also partially met:

- a. At the syntactic level, *(que) era/es broma* has autonomy with respect to the sentence or paragraph. Its position tends to be fixed (at the end of an utterance or paragraph) and separate from the fragment to which it refers. It has clear intonational pauses before and after, often marked by punctuation. Few examples can be found in which there is no subsequent pause because there is an addition of something like “*que era broma lo de tu tía*” (lit. ‘it was a joke that stuff about your aunt’). The extrapredicative character of discourse markers is generally marked by pauses in intonation, and commas in writing (Martín Zorraquino, 2015, 41), thus lending them suprasegmental autonomy. In this way *(que) era/es broma* is similar to a peripheral connector, as it can modify a simple statement, a paragraph, or an entire text.
- b. Discourse markers are morphologically invariable. The presence of *que* is not constant, sometimes being used and sometimes omitted. Furthermore, we can find the expression in the present or in the past (*es/era*). In both cases, it refers to a past time immediately prior to what has just been said. The absence of other variables with other tenses or other verbs seems to suggest that it is a morphologically fixed, practically a lexicalized structure.
- c. Coordination with other markers is possible, *(que) era/es broma* can be found in expressions like *oye, que no, que era broma, ¿eh?* Although less common, it also admits negation: *(que) no era/es broma*. In this case its pragmatic value changes.

Semantically, the opposition in the linguistic system between *en serio* (meaning ‘really’) and *en broma* does not occur in a clearly dichotomous way. *En broma* appears marked as an expression used in humorous environments with the intention of making people laugh. Both *en broma* and *en serio* maintain their first literal meaning, so that the utterance remains transparent. As for syntagmatic combinations, *en serio* tends to be preceded by *no*, *ahora* or the combination of both; meanwhile, *es broma* and *si era broma* appear, but not *en broma*. *Es broma* emphasizes the humorous context in which it appears and helps the recipient in drawing the appropriate inferences so that the humorous outcome can be reached. Its appearance serves to indicate that the preceding argument must be interpreted in a humorous way². Ruiz Gurillo (2015, 2019a) claims that both are

2 “Prior to the activation of such inferences and the resolution of the incongruity, the listener/reader has to understand that their speaker/writer has adopted a humorous mode” (Ruiz Gurillo, 2019b, 1231–1232). According to Shilikhina (2017, 117) there are four traits

“discursive marker idioms” (Ruiz Gurillo, 2015, 193); she also notes that, unlike *en serio*, the variant *es broma* is not found in the DFDEA (2004) (Ruiz Gurillo, 2015, 195³) with a meaning close to the literal, and its main component (*serio*, *broma*) is semantically transparent. She argues that its uses are broader than the adverbials included in specialised grammar books, and that *es broma* emphasizes the humorous context in which it appears, along with phraseological markers, which also help to achieve appropriate inferences in humorous texts (Ruiz Gurillo, 2015, 196). *Es broma* is considered a humorous element that can be inserted into the classic “serious premise - humorous conclusion” structure. Consequently, *es broma* acts both as a marker and as a humorous element.

2. Pragmatic characterization of *(que) es broma*

Theories on the analysis of verbal humour underline the need for a shared framework for the effective development of a humorous sequence. Without this complicit interpretation, that text or message could turn out to be absurd, offensive, or irrelevant.

(Que) es/era broma expresses the speaker’s attitude and leads to a rereading and reinterpretation through marks or indicators of typical verbal humour (ambiguity, polysemy, etc.). When placed at the end of a fragment of speech, it modifies that fragment substantially. This contributes to the effect of surprise, in that it initially activates a literal or linear reading, then immediately introduces a second, comic one. Both readings can coexist, (see *Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humour*, Raskin, 1985), or the recipient chooses one of them. The joke implicit in the fragment is realized only when *(que) es/era broma* appears and denies the truth of what has just been said, reframing it in a comic or informal way.

However, there are other contexts in which it contains a value of mitigation or attenuation: when the speaker perceives that something he has said has not been formulated correctly and the interlocutor is not receiving the message with the intended interpretation, be it due to an ambiguous word, a lack of tact, some sort of inadequacy in terms of style or register, etc. In this case, to lessen the possible negative impact on one’s own image and that of the recipient, the

of humour: an additional cognitive effort, humorous discourse as a playful scenario, an attenuated degree of cooperation, and the use of explicit reaffirming expressions (humorous elements or ‘marks’) of that scenario, especially: “I’m kidding/joking”, but only when it is considered necessary to do so, that it, this expression is not uttered in all cases.

3 *En serio* adds an argument or clarification in a humorously constructed environment, opening a parenthesis to the serious mode in a text that has been conceived, constructed, and prepared in a humorous mode (Ruiz Gurillo, 2015, 207). *Es broma* emphasizes the humorous context, its purpose is to mark the humorous mode when the text develops. *En serio* contains an argumentative instruction to interpret the following phrase, whereas *es broma* directs its argument towards the immediately preceding fragment, indicating that it must be interpreted in a comical way, thus opening a parenthesis in the serious mode.

addition of the expression *(que) es broma* automatically removes the character of truth and seriousness from what has been said and softens the impact, often eliminating it: fundamentally it mitigates the potential inadvertent offense in the initial statement.

Non-bona fide is “a mode in which the speaker is not committed to the truth of what is being said and the hearer is aware of this non-commitment” (Raskin, 2007, 99). In the case of *(que) es broma*, the listener is not aware of the speaker’s non-commitment, that is, that the frame is humorous. There may not have been enough humorous elements, or some element of the context or verbalization offer ambiguous interpretations. As a mitigating mechanism, the expression appears in response to the perception, by the sender, of a facial gesture or an uncomfortable attitude of the recipient. The speaker decides to emphasize the *non-bona fide* condition through this marker, reinforcing the actual meaning. The listener transforms the information he considers reliable (*bona fide*) into *non-bona fide* (NBF), and thus perceives the humorous meaning. Even if he detects one or more violations of the principle of cooperation, or its maxims, he cognitively steps back and reinterprets the text as a joke.

3. Analysis of examples

This analysis draws on data from the Reference Corpus of Current Spanish (CREA) Spain section (Royal Spanish Academy), the Diachronic Corpus of Spanish (CORDE), and the Corpus of 21st Century Spanish (CORPES XXI).

We have selected paragraphs rather than just sentences, in order to have sufficient context for interpretation. We excluded from the search criteria those cases without previous pause, or which did not modify the interpretation of the preceding material, as it happens in the negative versions: *que no es era broma*.

The study corpus largely comprises texts from Peninsular Spanish, although there are also some examples from other territories: USA (17), Mexico (14) Peru (3) and Argentina (2).

For the expression *es broma*, CREA yields 70 cases from 61 documents. Of these, 12 can be classified as mitigators and 46 have the adverb *no* in front, without a comma: *no es broma*. 11 are of Spanish origin and one from Mexico.

CREA yields 18 cases of *era broma* from 16 documents. Of these, two can be described as mitigators (one from Spain; one from Argentina) and 11 have the adverb *no* in front, without a comma: *no es broma*, as a negative version.

CORDE yields 78 cases of *es broma* from 62 documents. Of these, six can be classified as mitigators, of which three are from Spain, two from Guatemala, and one from Colombia; 37 have a negative version.

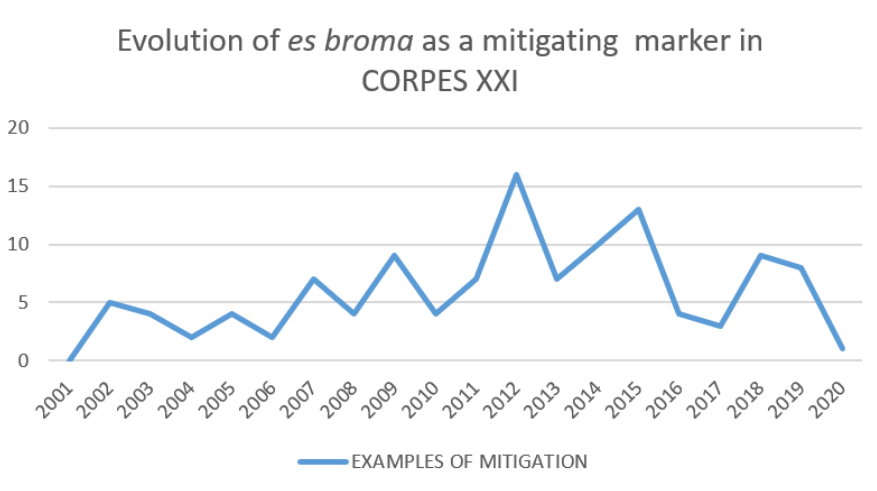
CORDE yields 20 cases of *era broma* from 16 documents. Of these, two can be classified as mitigators and six have negative version.

In CORPES XXI *es broma* appears 284 times, from 235 documents. Of these, 113 can be classified as mitigators and 122 have negative version: *no es broma*. Of these 113, a total of 92 come from Spain, 14 from Mexico, two from Chile, two from Argentina, and one each from Peru, Colombia and Costa Rica. We discarded one case from Chile and five from Spain because they were repeated.

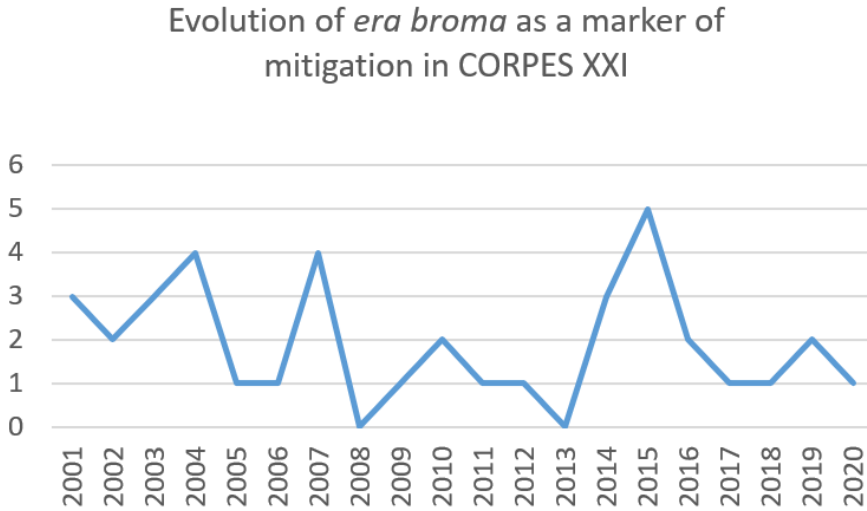
CORPES XXI yields 85 cases of *era broma* from 75 documents. Of these, 37 can be classified as mitigators, the majority coming from Spain (25); there are also three from Mexico, three from Chile, two from Uruguay, two from Venezuela, and one each from Argentina and Peru. There are 21 cases of negative version. There is also an observable increase in frequency of occurrence over time. One case from Uruguay was discarded because it was repeated.

Analysis of distribution shows that the mitigating value has gained presence over time and continues to do so, compared to its negative version, which decreases. Consider the data for the year 2001–2020:

Graph 1. Evolution of *es broma* as a marker of mitigation in CORPES XXI



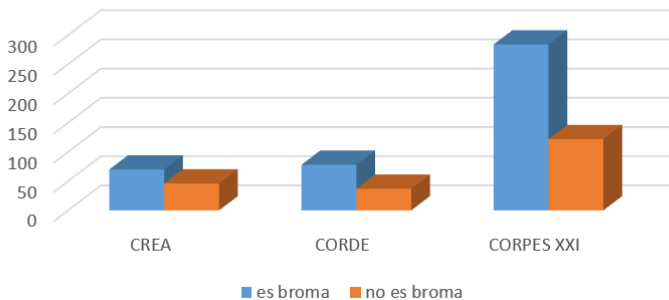
Graph 2. Evolution of *era broma* as a marker of mitigation in CORPES XXI

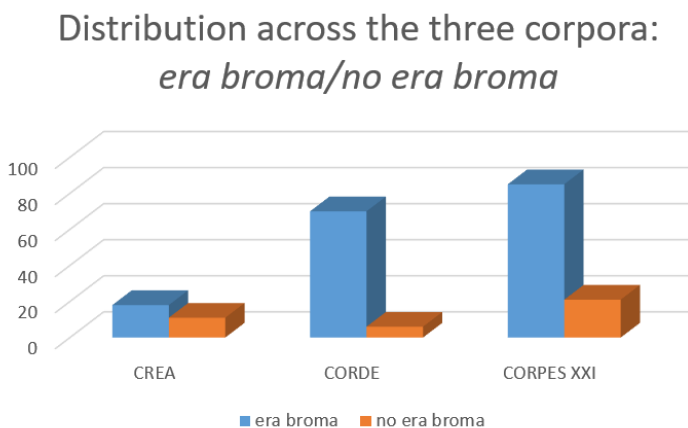


Regarding the proportion of negative variants in the present and past, the number of cases seems quite high; however, if we consider these proportionally, we note that in CORPES XXI they have decreased considerably:

Graph 3. Distribution across the three corpora: *es broma/no es broma*

**Distribution across the three corpora:
*es broma/no es broma***



Graph 4. Distribution across the three corpora: *era broma/no era broma*

(Que) es broma occurs in CREA 70 times (61 documents) between 1976–2004; in CORDE it appears 78 times (62 documents) for 1657–1972; and in CORPES XXI just five times (four documents) for 2001–2020. We left aside those in which the expression follows a verb of diction or thought, because in such cases we are just dealing with a mere substantive completive proposition.

Table 1. Number of concordances of *es broma* per corpus and time period

CORPUS	<i>(que) es broma.</i> Not a marker	<i>(que) es broma.</i> Marker	TIME PERIOD
CORDE	78	6	1657–1972
CREA	70	12	1976–2004
CORPES XXI	284	119	2001–2020

CREA yields 18 cases of *(que) era broma* from 16 documents between 1977–2002, CORDE yields 20 cases from 16 documents for 1878–1971.

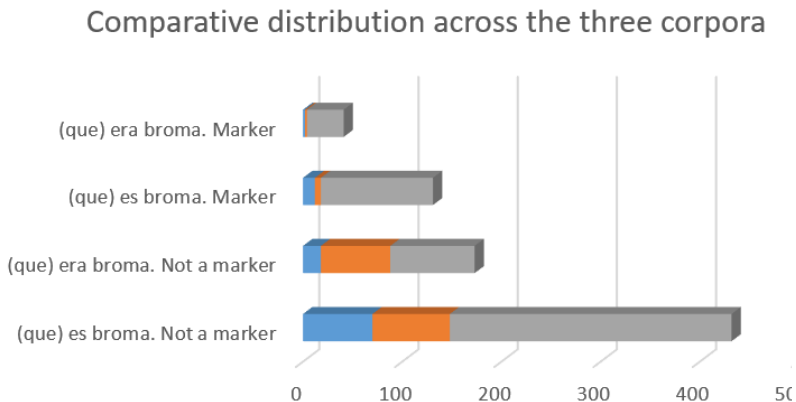
Table 2. Number of concordances of *es broma* per corpus and time period

CORPUS	<i>(que) era broma.</i> Not a marker	<i>(que) era broma.</i> Marker	TIME PERIOD
CORDE	20	2	1878–1971
CREA	18	2	1977–2002
CORPES XXI	85	37	2001–2020

With a verb in either the present or past, the increase in use as a mitigating marker has increased considerably over the last 20 years in proportion to trends from the 17th century onwards.

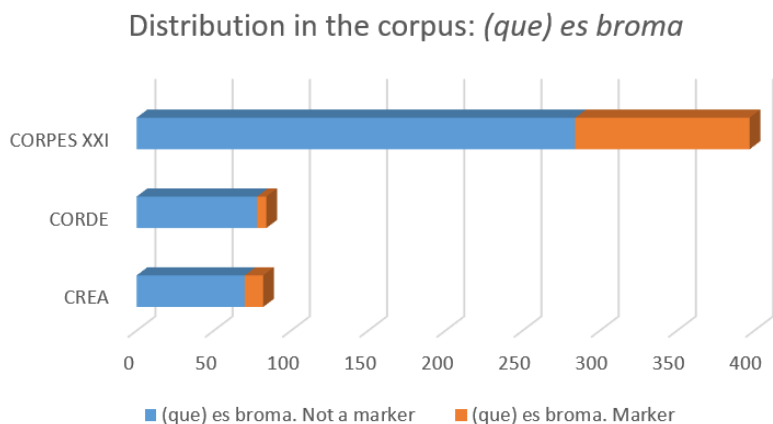
Regarding the distribution of the use of the expression as a mitigating marker, the CORPES XXI data show a notable increase.

Graph 5. Comparative distribution across the three corpora



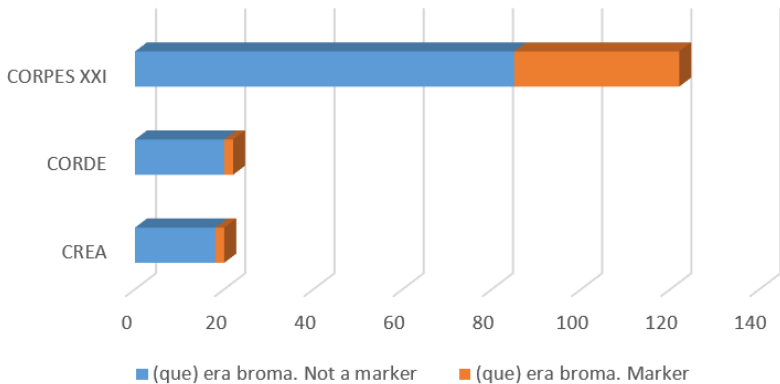
The mitigating use once again stands out notably in the last two decades (2000–2020) compared to the two previous time frames.

Graph 6. Distribution in corpus: *(que) es broma*



Graph 7. Distribution in corpus: (que) era broma

Distribution in the corpus: (que) era broma



REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA
Concordancias (RAE)

Obtención de Ejemplos

Concordancias

Palabras: 1 de 1. Ver párrafos

Nº	CONCORDANCIA	AÑO	AUTOR	ESPANOL	PAIS	TITULO
1	... la gente... No se acuerdo a las oca. loraed creed que es broma, pero no a la más tarde a las oca y se...	1992	Andrés Bello	ESPAÑA	ESPAÑA	11 de lazo extrae
2	... el libro de la Carta de Babilis está escrita. No creas que es broma, no puedo andar... No sea terror ja ja...	1992	Pérez Galdós, Benito	ESPAÑA	ESPAÑA	12 de lazo extrae
3	... broma... ¿Broma?... Para que volvieres, y me digas que es broma, y de perdimento... ¿Es que te...	1994	Pérez Galdós, Benito	ESPAÑA	ESPAÑA	12 de lazo extrae
4	... broma y desahucios?... ¿Broma? Pero ¿cómo crees que es broma?... ¿Es hijo con una mala ser...	1994	Utrero, Miguel de	ESPAÑA	ESPAÑA	12 de lazo extrae
5	... ¿Hubo la angé un reacción?... ¿De las apéca de que es broma, que si... ¿La reacción es verdad...	1995	López, Vicente Fandi	ESPAÑA	ESPAÑA	12 de lazo extrae
6	... con una selección literata?... ¿Broma?... Ya veis que es broma sígna de figurar en una novela... ¿Hare...	1995	Castell, Emilio	ESPAÑA	ESPAÑA	12 de lazo extrae
7	... amento. Si que decir que se que el fiteame de que es broma, que que se que en que que broma...	1995	Lara, Luciano José de	ESPAÑA	ESPAÑA	12 de lazo extrae

Nueva consulta: CREA CORDE Nómina de autores y obras Ayuda.

Fig. 1. Extract of que es broma in CORDE

Corpus del Español del Siglo XXI (CORPES)

Concordancia

Palabras: 1 de 1. Ver párrafos

REF	(Clasificación, país)	CONCORDANCIA
01	2001 Esp	como sabe que a mí la palma del moqueo me sata rápido, rectica entragado. ¿ Qui...
02	19 2004 Méx	era broma. En mi casa banen muy cierto que puedo escribir cosas graciosa...
03	2000 Esp	era broma. No todo...
04	2004 Méx	era broma. ¿Que me habías jugado no sé qué cosa. Fue que me acordé. Qué en esa...
05	2004 Méx	era broma. Le voy a contar un cuento. Se los cuento a mí en el botín de...
06	2004 Esp	era broma, que así nadie pueda caerse a hacer un cuajante tan seguro. La...
07	2006 Chile	era broma. Pero si el me desagrada de la tierra y no sé hasta donde quedaban la...
08	2004 Esp	era broma, que después de las Fátima me habian a casa. ¡Inclamo dos horas por...
09	2004 Esp	era broma. Como se va a morir Fernando? ¿Por qué? ¿Que se acuerde con el mundo?
10	2004 Esp	era broma. La idea, no tengo ni para comer. Pero cuando llegó, descubrió que...
11	2011 Esp	era broma. ¿A mí? ¡Responde! ¡Pero si yo no te he pagado nada a mí! ¿En fin?
12	2011 Méx	era broma pero pronto descubrió que no, su ultimatum era claro: o me dedicaba de...
13	2011 Esp	era broma. A mí, si quiero que te diga la verdad, siempre me ha parecido muy...
14	2011 Esp	era broma. Yo no me amputo de nada. Los grandes casos implican a muchos a...
15	2011 Esp	era broma, que José Calisto sólo quería mostrarme, que se le venía. La intención...
16	2011 Esp	era broma. Como vos, de verdad. ¡Bueno, ¡bueno! Pero si yo soy un hombre que...
17	2011 Esp	era broma, pero voy a Francia y volver con semejante...
18	2011 Esp	era broma. Cecilia, Ramón Cuevas, ven, venida buena, que nosotros no somos...
19	2011 Esp	era broma.
20	2011 Chile	era broma.

Fig. 2. Selection of examples from CORPES XXI

The qualitative analysis shows that the previous pause is brief with respect to what it completes, and in most cases is a comma, although there are also full stops (12), a colon (1), and an intonational pause. It is possible to find nouns such as *hombre* on the left (4) and on the right (9). To the right of the expression, we can find either a full stop, an explanatory apposition that disambiguates the joke, an affectionate nickname such as *tonta* (3), a snide laugh (8) or an insult such as *por Dios* (5), *gilipollas* (7), *coño* (11). Reiteration of the marker is frequent (10) as well as emphatic elements *que no, que no*, denying (16) or rectifying (1).

Whereas the examples recorded here are drawn from written sources, they show a high degree of orality: 17 reproduce something said in direct speech, so we can plausibly claim that it appears more frequently as a marker in oral environments.

4. Conclusions

We have described the increasing appearance of the discourse marker *(que) es/era broma* in examples from three corpora of Spanish. The values of this marker express a rectifying pattern, mitigating a threat or an instance of inappropriateness, by reformulating or correcting the intention inferred. It confirms the mitigating politeness (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1996, 53–60) used to balance the image of the listener and the speaker (Hernández Flores, 2002). Some paraphrases for the expression might be: “por favor, no tomes en serio lo que he dicho” (lit. ‘please don’t take what I said seriously’), “no te ofendas” (lit. ‘do not be offended’), “no pretendía ofenderte” (lit. ‘I did not pretend to offend you’, meaning ‘no offence intended’), “disculpa mi imprecisión o inadecuación lingüística” (lit. ‘excuse my imprecision or linguistic inadequacy’). It remains open to research whether the expression has similar values in other languages: *just kidding/joking* in English, *que és broma* in Catalan, *sto scherzando* in Italian, *Je blague/ Je rigole/ Je plaisante* in French, *estou brincando/ brincadeira* in Portuguese, etc.

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