Truly Asserting and Truly Committing: Truth-Based Speech Act Operators in Spanish*

Anna Kocher
Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt
anna.kocher@ku.de
0000-0002-7121-6007

Raúl Bendezú-Araujo
Universität Potsdam
raul.bendezu.araujo@uni-potsdam.de
0000-0002-2929-4140



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Abstract

This article presents a case study on two Spanish modifiers, *la verdad* and *de verdad*, which share the lexical base *verdad* 'truth' but demonstrate distinct distributions and functions. We argue that these modifiers operate on different layers of the speech act structure, adopting the recent model by Krifka (2023, 2024). Corpus data show *la verdad* is less frequent, restricted to peripheral positions, and exclusively modifies assertions. *De verdad* is more frequent, syntactically mobile, and appears in various speech acts (assertions, questions, exclamations). We propose that *de verdad* is a modifier of the commitment operator, specifying the commitment event as truthful, resulting in a strengthening effect, while *la verdad* is a modifier of the assertion operator, specifying the act of asserting as truthful, which often relates to politeness. This distinction in the proposed analysis accounts for their differing distributional profiles and semantic effects.

Keywords: commitment; assertion; commitment modifiers; speech act modifiers; Spanish

Resum. *Assercions de veritat i compromisos de veritat: els operadors d'acte de parla de base veritativa en castellà*

Aquest article presenta un estudi de cas sobre dos modificadors del castellà, *la verdad* i *de verdad*, que comparteixen la base lèxica *verdad* ('veritat'), però que presenten distribucions i funcions

* It is a pleasure to dedicate this paper to M.Teresa Espinal. Speech act operators have come to occupy a prominent place in her recent research, and our case study of *la verdad* and *de verdad* is offered as a small contribution to that line of work. We thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

diferents. Defensem que aquests modificadors operen en nivells diferents de l'estructura de l'acte de parla, seguint el model recent de Krifka (2023, 2024). Les dades de corpus mostren que *la verdad* és menys freqüent, està restringit a posicions perifèriques i modifica exclusivament assercions. *De verdad* és més freqüent, té mobilitat sintàctica i apareix en diversos actes de parla (assercions, preguntes, exclamacions). Proposem que *de verdad* és un modificador de l'operador de compromís —que especifica l'esdeveniment de compromís com a veraç i produeix un efecte de reforç—, mentre que *la verdad* és un modificador de l'operador d'asserció —que especifica l'acte d'asseverar com a veraç, fet que sovint es relaciona amb la cortesia. Aquesta distinció en l'anàlisi proposada explica els seus perfils distributius i efectes semàntics divergents.

Paraules clau: compromís; asserció; modificació de compromís; modificació de l'acte de parla; acte de parla

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1. Introduction

The present article contributes a case study on the two modifiers *la verdad* 'the truth' and *de verdad* 'of truth' in Spanish. They share a lexical base *verdad* 'truth' and at first glance appear alike but, relying on corpus data, we will show that they have very different distributions. We will argue that the modifiers operate on different levels of the speech act structure: *la verdad* modifies a speech act directly, and *de verdad* modifies a commitment. We will adopt Krifka's (2023, 2024) recent model of speech act structure, that identifies the central semantic operators involved in speech acts and maps them onto the syntactic structure. These operators can be modified. There is a broad understanding of how these semantic operators function and the consequences of modifying them. There is also some initial work that delves deeper and offers systematic case studies (for instance Espinal & Cyrino 2025; Real Puigdollers et al. 2025). By applying the model to *de verdad* and *la verdad*, we aim to contribute another thorough case study and thereby aim at furthering our understanding of commitment and speech act modification.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the modifiers and their usage in greater detail in 2.1 and summarizes previous accounts of these modifiers in the literature in section 2.2. Section 3 is dedicated to a corpus investigation of the modifiers in order to gain information about their distribution and derive conclusions about it. Section 3.1 presents the corpus and methods, section 3.2 the results, and finally in section 3.3 we offer our interpretation of the data. In section 4 we develop the theoretical analysis of the modifiers. In section 4.1 we detail the theoretical model we use, in section 4.2 we apply it to the modifiers, and in section 4.3 we explain how the distribution and usage of the modifiers follow from our analysis. Section 5 concludes the article.

2. Truth-based modifiers in Spanish

This section presents the general properties of *de verdad* and *la verdad* in a first descriptive approach, focusing on their meaning contribution. The section also contains an overview on the treatment of these modifiers in the linguistic literature.

2.1. Same same, but different

This study focuses on *la verdad* ~ 'frankly' and *de verdad* ~ 'really'. Both have the same lexical base (*verdad* 'truth'),[1] but have different structures: *la verdad* (lit.: 'the truth') is a DP and *de verdad* (lit.: 'of truth') is a PP. In their use that is relevant in the present article neither of the modifiers appears to contribute to the truth of the proposition. Both operate on a higher, i.e. pragmatic, level of meaning. The DP *la verdad* can also be used to mean simply 'the truth', and can be a regular subject or object of a sentence, as for instance in *Digo la verdad* 'I tell the truth'. This use can easily be differentiated from the speech-act-modifying function we are interested in in the present article. The PP *de verdad* can be used as an adverbial modifier for different types of phrases, for instance for DPs as in *una mujer de verdad* 'a real/proper woman' or for APs as in *es tonto de verdad* 'he is really stupid'. In the present article, we are interested solely in the cases where *de verdad* modifies a sentence-like object or a proposition. There are borderline cases where what is modified by *de verdad* is ambiguous, specifically when it modifies verbs. In *me interesa de verdad* 'it really interests me' it could either be that the modification only applies to the verb, or that it takes scope over the whole proposition. For our corpus investigation in section 3, we chose to be cautious and excluded ambiguous examples, so that our sample only contains instances where *de verdad* unambiguously modifies a whole proposition.

In the cases that are relevant for our investigation, the two modifiers at first glance might appear interchangeable in declarative clauses, but there are crucial differences in their meaning and use.

(1) a. Tengo frío. Te ríes. Pero de verdad tengo frío.
have cold CL laugh but DE VERDAD have cold
'I am cold. You laugh. But really I am cold.'[2]

b. - A: Es la costumbre… ¡Siempre se ha hecho así!
is the habit always CL has done so
- B: Muchas gracias. Pero, la verdad, no me gusta aceptarlos.
thank you but LA VERDAD not CL like accept-them
'- A: It's customary… We've always done it like this!
- B: Thank you very much. But, frankly, I don't like to accept them.'

1. There are also other modifiers with the same lexical base in Spanish, for instance *de veras*, *en verdad*, *de la verdad*, but these are not the focus of this article.
2. All data are taken from our sample from the OpenSubtitles2018 corpus (see section 3 for details).

In (1a), an example of the proposition that is modified by *de verdad* is already given in a context and therefore repeated by the speaker. The effect of the modifier is that the speaker insists on the proposition and strengthens their commitment to it.[3] In (1b), in turn, with *la verdad,* the speaker is trying to soften the blow of a break in the social norms (B is rejecting an offer by A), and thus its use is related to politeness.[4]

2.2. State of the art

According to Garcés-Gómez (2020) both *la verdad* and *de verdad* have been documented as modifiers since the 15th century. The author states that they are the product of a grammaticalization process that involved the weakening of the referential meaning of its lexical base (*verdad* 'truth') and the consequent development of a functional pragmatic meaning through the incorporation of values related to the speaker's perspective.

They have been mentioned in the literature under different categories: *la verdad* as a pragmatic marker and *de verdad* as an adnominal/adverbial modifier (González 2015: 177). This might explain why much more attention has been given to *la verdad*, while the pragmatic function of *de verdad* is described only in terms of assertion intensification (González 2015: 168; Garcés-Gómez 2020: 998). In a more recent paper by Kocher (2023), a link is established between *de verdad* and verum. The dominant verum strategy in assertions, the particle *sí*, is ungrammatical in non-assertive speech acts, in which *de verdad* can be used to express this meaning. Notably, in Kocher (2023), even though the empirical focus is on the *sí*-strategy, verum essentially boils down to stress on commitment. Both its function as an assertion intensifier identified by González (2015) and Garcés-Gómez (2020) and the relation to verum and commitment in Kocher (2023) fit closely with our analysis of *de verdad* as a commitment modifier.

For *la verdad* a wider range of functions have been identified in the literature. These include marking epistemic values, strengthening speaker commitment and/or speaker sincerity, intensifying or mitigating an argument, and indicating a countering or re-orientation of the hearer's discourse expectations (cf. González 2015; Soler Bonafont 2017; Garcés-Gómez 2020). Note that these authors treat *la verdad* and *la verdad es que* as manifestations of the same semantic unit. We, however, chose to focus solely on *la verdad* (see section 3.1). It might be the case that some of the more commitment-oriented readings are linked to *la verdad es que*

3. We adopt a gradable notion of commitments (in line with Northrup 2014; Krifka 2023, 2024, 2026; Kocher 2026a, b). Other authors, however, maintain that commitments are non-gradable, a speaker is either committed or not and thus commitments cannot be strengthened in their view (see for instance Katriel & Dascal 1989; Kissine 2008; Cornillie 2018; Geurts 2019b).
4. An anonymous reviewer asked whether there are any interactions between prosodic marking and the use of these modifiers. According to native speakers, both *de verdad* and *la verdad* can be accentuated. The effect was described as being emphatic, similar as when the modifiers were doubled. Given the connection established in Kocher (2023) between *de verdad*, *sí* and verum, however, the interaction of commitment modification and prosodic prominence clearly merits dedicated empirical work. We leave this for future investigations.

rather than *la verdad.* Another possibility is that the commitment-strengthening and epistemic values are inferred. This is supported by the fact that there seems to be a certain degree of overlap in the functions identified by the authors, as it is often difficult to tell them apart in concrete examples. Take example (2), which González (2015: 172) classifies as a case where *la verdad* has an intensifying value, akin to the English adverb 'really'. However, the same example could also be read as a case where *la verdad* is a speech act modifier like 'frankly'.

(2) Señor Presidente, hay días en que no comprendo, la verdad,
Mr President there.are days in CP not understand LA VERDAD
este Parlamento que siente un placer masoquista en automutilarse
this Parliament CP feel a pleasure masochist in self-mutilation
'Mr. President, there are days when I *really* cannot understand this Parliament. It seems to take a masochistic pleasure in self-mutilation.'
(González 2015: 172, ex. (18))

Of the range of functions mentioned above, the most relevant to the purposes of this paper is the use of *la verdad* to intensify or mitigate arguments and manage the hearer's expectations by eliminating potential alternatives to the proposition under its scope. This effect appears to derive from the lexical meaning of its base. According to Soler Bonafont (2017: 440), *verdad* 'truth' incorporates a corrective process into discourse by signalling to a true/false opposition, which triggers the selection of the correct inferences from among all those that the hearer could have been considering to be true.

3. Corpus distribution

The present section contains the main empirical data we use to motivate our analysis. Given that so far the modifiers have not been studied comparatively, we rely on corpus data to gain a first impression of their distribution. When necessary, the corpus data are complemented by additional constructed examples to showcase the (lack of) felicity of the modifiers in contexts that were not attested in our corpus sample. In this section we first introduce the corpus and methods, then present the results and finally offer our interpretation of these results.

3.1. Corpus and methods

To get a grasp of the distribution of the modifiers, a representative sample was drawn from the OpenSubtitles2018 corpus.[5] This corpus consists of movie subtitles in various languages. It is continuously updated and is especially useful as a parallel corpus of multiple languages. For the research at hand, the corpus was chosen because of its size—it contains 1.6 billion sentences in Spanish—and because it is very close to authentic spoken language. However, there are also two main draw-

5. <https://opus.nlpl.eu/cwb/OpenSubtitles2018/frames-cqp.html>.

backs: first, there is no possibility to distinguish between different varieties and dialects of Spanish, and second, it is impossible to determine whether an occurrence stems from an original Spanish-language movie or is a translated subtitle. In spite of this, we believe that the advantages in size and naturalness of the data outweigh the drawbacks in this first larger study of this phenomenon.

We randomly selected 2000 instances of *de verdad* and *la verdad*, of which we identified 200 true positives for the former and only 60 true positives of the latter. We excluded cases of *de verdad* where a noun or verb were modified as in *un hombre de verdad* 'a real man' or *me gusta de verdad* 'I really like it'. Post-verbal *de verdad* can be ambiguous between a reading where the modification only applies to the predicate and a reading where it is a commitment modifier with the domain of modification comprising the whole proposition. This is illustrated in the examples in (3). In (3a) *de verdad* modifies the predicate. In (3b) it modifies the commitment.

(3) a. A: Ayer tomé matcha otra vez.
yesterday drank matcha again
B: Pensaba que no te gustaba y que solo disimulabas para estar
thought that not CL liked and that only pretended to be
a la última.
fashionable
A: Ah, sí, pero ahora que lo probé varias veces, me gusta de verdad.
ah yes but now that it tried multiple times CL like DE VERDAD
'A: Yesterday I had matcha again. B: I thought you didn't like it and you just pretended to appear fashionable. A: Ah, right. But now that I have tried it multiple times, I really do like it.'

b. A: ¿Qué tal tu nuevo curro? B: Es fantástico. Me gusta de verdad.
how is your new job is fantastic CL like DE VERDAD
'A: How is your new job? B: It's fantastic. I really like it.'

The contrast is subtle and it is often blurred in context. With the corpus data we used, we could not always clearly tell what the intended meaning was. Therefore, we were cautious and left the cases out, where a predicate-modification reading was possible. For *la verdad,* we excluded the cases with the common meaning 'the truth' like *es la verdad* 'it's the truth' and we also excluded cases containing the phrase *la verdad es que,* but see Soler Bonafont (2017) and Garcés-Gómez (2020) for analyses of *la verdad* and *la verdad es que*.

3.2. Results

The number of true positives is drastically different: We inspected only the first 220 of the 2000 sampled cases of *de verdad*, which already yielded 200 true positives. For *la verdad* we inspected the full 2000 cases and yielded only 60 true positives. Furthermore, our data suggest that the former modifier is not only vastly more frequent but also used in a broader and more varied fashion, whereas the use of *la verdad* is more restricted and specialized.

In our sample, *la verdad* appears exclusively in declaratives (see Table 1 and example 5). *De verdad* also shows a prevalence for this clause type, as can be seen in Table 1: 71% of all attested cases of this modifier are in declarative sentences. However, it also appears in interrogatives, as illustrated in example (4b) and exclamations (4c). We annotated all sentences that used exclamation marks as exclamations in our sample. They are either reduced structures like in (4c) or are full declaratives used as exclamations. In our sample we have found no attestations of exclamations using special exclamative clausal structure, like wh-exclamatives. However, native speakers find both modifiers acceptable in wh-exclamatives (*¡Qué tonto que eres, la verdad/de verdad!* 'How stupid you are, frankly/really!'), although with some restrictions. Further research is necessary to fully understand these.[6]

Table 1. Cases of *de verdad* and *la verdad* in different clause types

	declarative	interrogative	exclamations
de verdad	142 (71%)	52 (26%)	6 (3%)
la verdad	60 (100%)	0	0

(4) a. Mamá, de verdad estoy bien.
mama DE VERDAD am fine
'Mama, really, I'm fine.'

b. Oh, ¿De verdad quieres hacer esto?
oh DE VERDAD want do that
'Oh, you really want to do that?'

c. ¡No, no, no de verdad que no!
no no no DE VERDAD that no
'No, no, no, really: no!'

La verdad only appears in declaratives in our sample and is judged infelicitous in interrogatives by native speakers.

(5) a. Me ha sorprendido, la verdad.
CL has surprised LA VERDAD
'It surprised me, frankly.'

b. #¿La verdad quieres hacer esto?
LA VERDAD want-to do this

6. A reviewer suggested that exclamations could alternatively be treated as emphatic assertions, referencing Rett (2011). The exclamations-as-assertions view is also maintained by others (for instance Geurts 2019a; Trotzke & Giannakidou 2024). Other authors (Castroviejo 2008; Krifka 2024; Villalba 2024), however, have shown that exclamations differ from assertions in crucial respects. In this article, although it does not greatly impact the study on a whole, we follow the second view, and categorize exclamations separately from assertions.

Concerning the syntactic distribution of both modifiers, there are also differences that again suggest a more limited flexibility for *la verdad* compared to a larger degree of syntactic mobility for *de verdad* (see Table 2). Cases were annotated as peripheral if the modifier was preceded or followed by a comma, or, otherwise, if there was an intervening phrase between the verb and the modifier. Cases in which the modifier directly preceded or followed the verb, without a comma, were annotated as pre- or postverbal.

Table 2. Cases of *de verdad* and *la verdad* in different sentence positions

	left peripheral	preverbal	postverbal	right peripheral
de verdad	14 (7%)	53 (26.5%)	82 (41%)	51 (25.5%)
la verdad	22 (36.7%)	1 (1.6%)	0	37 (61.7%)

In our sample *la verdad* almost exclusively occupies peripheral positions at the left and right edge of the sentence, usually separated by a comma as illustrated in (6a) and (6b).

(6) a. Y, la verdad, no logro entenderlo.
and LA VERDAD not manage-to understand-it
'And, frankly, I don't manage to understand it.'

b. Tiene motivos, la verdad.
has motives LA VERDAD
'S/he has reasons, frankly.'

De verdad predominantly occupies sentence internal pre- and post-verbal positions (7a,b), but can also appear at the peripheries (7c,d).

(7) a. Y de verdad odio este estilo.
and DE VERDAD hate this style
'And I really hate this style.'

b. Ahora me voy de verdad.
now CL leave DE VERDAD
'Now I'll really leave.'

c. Y, de verdad, la voy a extrañar.
and DE VERDAD her going to miss
'And, really, I'm going to miss her.'

d. Es del tipo muy abierto, de verdad.
is of-the type very open DE VERDAD
'He is the very open kinda type, really.'

Both modifiers appear accompanying reduced structures, for instance as answers to questions.

(8) a. - ¿Y qué ocurrió? - Nada, la verdad.
and what happened nothing LA VERDAD
'- And what happened? - Nothing, frankly.'

b. - ¿Qué? - Ahora mismo, de verdad.
what right now DE VERDAD
'- What? - Right now, actually.'

But only *de verdad* appears in isolation functioning as a speech act of its own. In our data it is mostly attested as a question as in (9a), but also appears as an isolated assertion as in (9b). Neither case is attested nor felicitous according to native speakers with *la verdad*.

(9) a. ¿De verdad?
DE VERDAD
'Really?'

b. Ah, de verdad.
Ah DE VERDAD
'Ah, really.'

Furthermore, our sample also shows instances of *de verdad* in expressive speech acts (in the sense of Searle & Vanderveken 1985) like acts of thanking, as in (10a), or apologizing, as in (10b). Again, we did not find these types of attestations with *la verdad* nor are they felicitous according to native speakers.

(10) a. Gracias por venir, de verdad.
thanks for coming DE VERDAD
'Thanks for coming, really.'

b. Lo siento de verdad.
CL feel DE VERDAD
'I'm really sorry.'

In sum, in our sample, *la verdad* shows a more limited distribution: it is less frequent in general, being restricted to peripheral positions, and it exclusively modifies assertions. *De verdad*, in contrast, is more frequent, shows larger syntactic mobility and can appear in different speech acts such as assertions, questions and exclamations, including also expressive speech acts.

3.3. Interpretation

The syntactic distribution of *de verdad* is relatively flexible, but it does appear more frequently inside the core proposition. In turn, *la verdad* shows a clear preference for peripheral positions. The behaviour of the latter parallels what Meinunger (2004, 2009) notes about German speech act modifiers, which are base-generated in the German prefield (~ left periphery). *La verdad*, thus, matches the distributional

properties of a speech act modifier (see also González 2015, who draws a similar conclusion), and appears to be specialized for modifying assertions. *De verdad* is compatible with a large range of speech acts and does not appear to be specialized for one type. We propose that it operates on a lower level of structure as a commitment modifier, in the sense of Krifka (2023).

There is another observation we want to make here. It is our impression that *la verdad* combines most easily with propositions that have a subjective, speaker-centered reading. It often appears in our data with first person subjects, psych-verbs or propositions involving evaluative modifiers. *De verdad*, in turn, also in this respect, appears less restricted and modifies propositions of a larger variety. Our intuition is that this preference for subjective propositions appears to apply to speech act modifiers more broadly, hence the oddness of an assertion (and translation) like *?La verdad/Honestamente, Cervantes nació en el siglo XVI.* '?Honestly/Frankly, Cervantes was born in the 16th century'. In contrast, the same assertion appears perfectly natural with *de verdad* or *really* as *Cervantes de verdad nació en el siglo XVI.* 'Cervantes was really born in the 16th century.' We briefly return to this contrast in section 4.2. below. A systematic investigation of why speech act modifiers should be sensitive to the subjective dimension of their host proposition must be left for future work.

4. Formal analysis

Building on the results of the corpus investigation from section 3, here we present our formal analysis. We adopt Krifka's (2023, 2024) Layered Model of Assertions and apply it to *de verdad* and *la verdad.* Finally, we show how the contrasting distribution of these modifiers can be accounted for within our analysis.

4.1. Layered Model of Assertions

For the theoretical analysis we adopt the recent model developed by Krifka (2023, 2024) that we will call the Layered Model of Assertions. It is firmly grounded in recent speech act theory (for instance Brandom 1983; Kiss 1998; Alston 2000; MacFarlane 2011; Geurts 2019a,b; Shapiro 2020) and maps the semantic layers involved in assertions and other speech acts onto syntactic structure. The syntactization of pragmatic meaning has some precedence in the linguistic literature (see for instance Ross 1970; Lewis 1979; Rizzi 1997; Speas & Tenny 2003; Wiltschko 2014, 2021; Miyagawa 2022). However, Krifka's model is particular in that it is first and foremost a firmly grounded semantic model from which syntactic structure is derived. It is also one of the first models that formalizes commitment as a layer of semantic and syntactic structure. Another recent formal model that also revolves around the theoretical concept of commitment is developed by Geurts (2019a). This model, however, lacks the syntactic aspect, is non-compositional and therefore the model by Krifka (2023, 2024) is given precedence here.

Within the Layered Model of Assertions, functional meaning is represented by hierarchically ordered layers of structure above the core proposition which is

represented by the TP layer in syntax. This follows an idea that is also present in previous syntactic models of pragmatic meaning, namely that pragmatic meaning is structurally and semantically outside of the core sentence structure and proposition content. Each functional head in the Layered Model of Assertions contains a semantic operator operating on the semantic object it scopes above. All layers can host modifiers. The lowest layer above the TP is the judgment phrase JP, with J– as its operator. This operator turns the proposition into a subjective judgment by the speaker. It can host modifiers operating on the speaker's mental judgments, like epistemic and evidential expressions. Immediately above, the model posits the commitment phrase ComP, with the commitment operator ⊢. This operator turns subjective judgments over propositions into social commitments. Again, the layer can host modifiers specialized to impact commitments. The final layer of the structure is the speech act phrase ActP, with specialized operators depending on the speech act, • is used for assertions, and ? for questions. The speech act operators can be modified by corresponding speech act modifiers.

(11) [ActP [Act′ [Act◦ •] [ComP [Com′ [Com◦ ⊢] [JP [J′ [J◦ J–] [T P]]]]]]]
(adapted from Krifka 2023: 122, ex 10)[7]

The layers that are relevant for the present investigation are ComP, responsible for turning propositions into social commitments to propositions towards interlocutors, and ActP, responsible for the illocutionary effect of speech acts, like the performative common ground update of assertions.

(12) a. J– [Max snores loudly] = λj λi [Max snores loudly, according to j, in i]
(with j: judger, i: world-time index)
(adapted from Krifka 2023: 125, ex. (20))

b. ⊢ [J-[Max snores loudly]] = λj [j $\vdash_i$ λi [Max snores loudly, according to j, in i]]
(with j: judger, i: world-time index)
(adapted from Krifka 2023: 125, ex. (21))

c. • [⊢ [J-[Max snores loudly]]] = λc{i'| ∃i ∈ c [i◦–• i'[s $\vdash_i$ λi [Max snores loudly according to s, in i]]]}
(with s: speaker, i: world-time index, c: common ground)
(adapted from Krifka 2023: 126, ex. (24))

The step-by-step semantic derivation of the assertion *Max snores loudly* within the model is given in (12). First, the judgment operator is applied to the proposition (12a), it contributes a judger variable *j* that in assertions is usually bound by the speaker. Paraphrased, the effect of the judgment operator is that a judger *j* at time *i* considers that Max snores loudly. The commitment operator turns this subjective

7. Krifka's empirical focus is German, he assumes head finality for ComP and JP for this language; all phrases are head initial in the adapted version in (11).

judgment into a public commitment towards the interlocutors (12b). It can be translated to mean that at time *i*, the judger identified by the speaker, publicly commits to the proposition that Max snores loudly. Finally, the assertion operator in the speech act layer of the model is responsible for the illocutionary effect of the speech act. In this model, this is understood as the proposal to update the common ground with the proposition in question. Therefore (12c) can be paraphrased to mean that the speaker proposes that at time *i'*, immediately following *i*, the proposition that Max snores loudly should be contained in the common ground.

4.2. Towards an analysis of la verdad *and* de verdad

As stated above, our central idea based on their distribution is that *de verdad* and *la verdad* operate on different levels of meaning: *la verdad* appears to be specialized for modifying a particular speech act, namely an assertion, and we therefore propose that it is a speech act modifier. *De verdad* appears to be felicitous in a larger range of speech acts and contexts. In Kocher (2023) it has already been identified as a verum strategy and as an expression that strengthens a commitment. We therefore stipulate that it is a commitment modifier. Within the structure by Krifka (2023, 2024) we propose that *de verdad* occupies the specifier of ComP and *la verdad* the specifier of ActP. In the semantic analyses given in (13b) and (14b), the modification is analysed respectively as a coordination with the commitment and the speech act.[8]

(13) a. De verdad tengo frío.

b. • $\lambda i \exists e$ [s $\vdash_{i,e}$ p ∧ true commitment(i)(e)]
(with s: speaker, i: world-time index, e: commitment event)

Our semantic analysis of (13a), repeated from (1a) in section 2.1, is given in (13b). To paraphrase the commitment portion of the meaning of (13b), it means that at time *i* there is a commitment event *e*, in which the speaker publicly commits to being cold and this commitment event *e* is a truthful one at time *i*. The assertion operator turns this commitment into a proposal to update the common ground by *p*. The role of *de verdad* is to specify the commitment event it operates on as a true or truthful one. Speakers always publicly commit to propositions with assertions without explicitly stating it. We propose that flagging a commitment as a truthful one, and thereby making overt the fact that the speaker commits to this

8. Analysing the modification as a coordination follows the analysis by Krifka (2023: 150) of German *ehrlich gesagt* 'honestly said' as a speech act modifier. For his analysis of German *ehrlich* 'honestly' as a commitment modifier in Krifka (2023), he adopts a different option without coordination, but uses coordination for commitment modification in Krifka (2024). See Kocher (2026b) for a discussion on why the more recent version involving coordination in both cases of modification is preferable. See also Meinunger (2022) for an analysis of German *wirklich* and *in Wirklichkeit,* where both are treated as commitment modifiers, but they exhibit different distributions and different levels of expressiveness.

proposition, gives rise to the implicature that the commitment to the proposition is strengthened. Speakers choose to strengthen their commitment when the proposition is controversial or a question under discussion. This fits well with the use of *de verdad*: in (13a), the speaker strengthens their commitment to the proposition because the interlocutor's reaction (laughing) suggests that it is controversial or not taken seriously by them.

(14) a. La verdad, no me gusta aceptarlos.

b. $\bullet\, \lambda i \exists e\, [s \vdash_{i,e} p] \;\wedge$ true act($\bullet\, \lambda i \exists e\, [s \vdash_{i,e} p]$)
(with s: speaker, i: world-time index, e: commitment event)

Our analysis of (14a), repeated from (1b) in section 2.1, is given in (14b). It can be roughly paraphrased to mean that at time *i* speaker *s* proposes to update the common ground by *p* and that they act truthfully in proposing this. *La verdad* thereby specifies the act of asserting itself as true or truthful and not the commitment to the proposition as is the case with *de verdad*. With *la verdad* it is irrelevant if the proposition is controversial or relates to the question under discussion. We hypothesize that speech act modification also invites an implicature. We assume that addressees usually assume that speakers are sincere and truthful in the way they perform speech acts. Again, explicitly flagging that the act of asserting is 'the truth' with *la verdad* leads to pragmatic effects. Krifka (2023: 149) mentions the act modifier *frankly* and states that marking a speech act as a *frank* one can mean that social norms like politeness might be violated, which is very similar to what appears to happen in (14b).

This focus on the act of asserting itself also helps make sense of the impression noted in section 3.3. that *la verdad* prefers propositions with a subjective perspective. Where the asserted content concerns mere facts, such as when Cervantes was born, there is no relevant sense in which a speaker's act of asserting could be more or less truthful, and the modifier thus is infelicitous. *De verdad*, by contrast, modifies the commitment rather than the act, and is perfectly felicitous in such cases.

4.3. Explaining the distribution

In this section, we show how to extend the analysis to account for *de verdad* in non-assertive speech acts and offer answers to the question why *la verdad* shows a more restricted distributional profile than *de verdad*.

As *de verdad* is analyzed as a commitment modifier, we expect that it is felicitous in all speech acts involving commitments. Conversely, the broad distribution of the modifier therefore suggests that questions and certain expressive acts also involve commitment. For polar questions, Kocher (2026a), relying on Krifka (2024: 60), proposes the analysis in (15). Questions are viewed as speech acts that propose alternative continuations to a conversation. With a polar question a speaker suggests to the addressee to either commit to *p* ($\vdash$) or not commit to *p* ($\dashv$) in their next conversational move.

(15) a. ? $\lambda i\ \exists e\ [a \vdash_{i,e} p]$ or $[a \dashv_{i,e} p]$
(with a: addressee, i: world-time index, e: commitment event)
(adapted from Kocher 2026a: 22, ex. (32))

b. ? $\lambda i\ \exists e\ [a \vdash_{i,e} p \wedge \text{true commitment}(i)(e)]$ or $[a \dashv_{i,e} p \wedge \text{true commitment}(i)(e)]$
(with a: addressee, i: world-time index, e: commitment event)

The commitment at issue in questions is not the commitment of the speaker, but the commitment of the addressee. With *de verdad*, just as with epistemic and evidential expressions, there is an epistemic flip in questions, that shifts the origo from speaker to addressee (see Faller 2025). The contribution of *de verdad* in polar questions is the same as in assertions: it modifies the commitment. We also analyze it in the same fashion, as can be seen in our proposed analysis in (15b). The use of the commitment modifier in questions results in a biased reading that the speaker expects a positive answer to the proposition. It also appears to involve additional expressive overtones of unexpectedness and incredulity (see Romero & Han 2004 and Goodhue 2022 on *really* in English biased polar questions). This is not accounted for in our present analysis, but see Kocher (2026a) for an analysis of biased polar questions within the Layered Model of Assertions. We suspect that the incredulity-reading in our present case could be the result of an implicature. Generally, polar questions are biased by design towards a positive answer (see Krifka 2015; Roelofsen & Farkas 2015). The fact that the speaker chooses to press the addressee for a *true*-commitment to the proposition results in a marked expression. This appears to give rise to the implicature that the speaker held a different belief or commitment, or considered that the addressee was not committed to the proposition.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no previous formal analyses of expressive speech acts such as thanking and apologizing in the Layered Model of Assertions. However, Geurts (2019a) mentions expressive speech acts as types of minor speech acts and states that they also give rise to social commitments. Unlike assertions, they do not commit a speaker to the truth of a proposition, but rather, they commit a speaker to a psychological state. In other words, when thanking someone, a speaker commits to feel gratitude and publicly acknowledges the good deed the addressee performed. When apologizing to someone, the speaker commits to feeling remorseful towards the addressee for something the speaker did or said. Accounting for these in the Layered Model of Assertions requires further research. What is important, however, is the insight that also these expressive types of speech acts involve a public commitment by the speakers. And thus, the fact that *de verdad* is felicitous in these, is in line with its function as a commitment modifier.

La verdad is restricted to assertions. In the model, each speech act is expressed by a dedicated operator responsible for their illocutionary function in a conversation. What our results show is that the expressions that modify speech acts are sensitive to the content of the head of the phrase. In other words, act modifiers are selective and appear to be specialized for certain operators. In our data we found *la verdad* modifying full-fledged assertions (see 6a,b in section 3.2), but we also found attestations in reduced structures (see 8 in section 3.2), typically as

answers to questions. However, answers to questions, even in the reduced form or as a mere answer particle, assert an antecedent proposition. Therefore, also with these structurally reduced cases, the role of *la verdad* is to modify an assertion.

Lastly, although this article will not enter into a deep discussion of the syntactic dimension of the model (see structure 11 in 4.1), broadly speaking, the preference for *la verdad* to surface at the clausal edges and *de verdad* to be closer to the core proposition is in principle compatible with the structure proposed by Krifka (2023), that posits the act layer above the commitment layer. However, there are also many cases where *de verdad* occupies a peripheral position (see Table 2). Additionally, both modifiers occupy positions at the left and the right edge of the clause. Whether the syntactic position affects the meaning of our modifiers, and this class of modifiers more generally, has not been investigated, to the best of our knowledge. Further systematic research is necessary in order to develop a sound syntactic analysis. The first step is to determine what the base position of each modifier is, that is, in what position their reading as a speech act or commitment modifier is most neutral. The distribution of the modifiers in the corpus data offers some indication, but more extensive testing is required. The second step would then be to determine whether the non-neutral positions have a systematic impact on the interpretation of the modifiers. For instance, it has been observed that right-peripheral modifiers lend themselves most easily to inter-subjective readings (for instance Beeching & Detges 2014). Only once these facts are established, is it possible to determine the position where the modifiers are externally merged, analyse the derived positions and establish what types of features might provoke the movement of the modifiers. For now, we take the most naive working hypothesis that the modifiers are externally merged as specifiers of the respective heads that they modify, that is SpecComP in the case of *de verdad*, and SpecActP in the case of *la verdad*.

Finally, while in part the distribution of these two modifiers could be brought in as support for the syntactic part of the Layered Model of Assertions, it is precisely the syntactic part of Krifka's model that to-date is less developed. Therefore, presently the flexibility many modifiers exhibit and the (potential) impact of the syntactic position on the meaning of the modifiers, cannot be explained satisfactorily yet.

5. Conclusion

This paper offers a systematic case study of the Spanish modifiers *la verdad* and *de verdad*. While they share the lexical root *verdad*, our detailed corpus investigation showed they cannot be treated as synonyms. The data clearly revealed large differences in their usage and distribution. This motivated our theoretical account.

We applied Krifka's (2023, 2024) Layered Model of Assertions, which isolates distinct semantic operators involved in the meaning composition of assertions. We linked the distributional patterns to different modification sites: we argued that *la verdad* directly modifies the speech act while *de verdad* modifies the speaker's commitment to the proposition. This is the key distinction, and over the course of the article, we argued that it offers a principled explanation for their syntactic distribution as well as their (restricted) use in certain types of speech acts.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the recent theoretical research on social meaning and speech acts by providing a systematic empirical application of Krifka's model. Understanding the systematic differences between these two modifiers provides valuable insight into both Spanish pragmatics and the universal structures of speech acts and commitments.

More broadly, the contrast between *la verdad* and *de verdad* aligns with a growing strand of work on Ibero-Romance discourse-related expressions that probe the layered architecture of speech acts. This includes Espinal & Cyrino's (2025) analysis of Catalan *jo* as an experiencer and Real Puigdollers et al.'s (2025) account of *vaya*'s grammaticalization from judgment to commitment marker. The comparative picture that is emerging from this body of work strikes us as one of the most promising routes for refining the Layered Model of Assertions.

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