Signalling digression in Spanish and English: Evidence from parliamentary discourse

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ENG Abstract. Digression is a discourse function that is identifiable and distinct from other similar functional strategies, and varies cross-linguistically. This paper investigates the way speakers of Spanish and English digress from their main discourse topics and how these transitions are marked. Once digression is defined by the proposal of four features considered to be inherent in this concept, the paper focuses on so-called 'digression formulating phrases', recurrent expressions which make explicit reference to the digression and signal that a new direction with respect to topic is proposed. The paper thus adopts a less common than the usual approach to discourse coherence and digression, whose literature has largely focused on discourse markers. The dataset, extracted from a corpus of parliamentary discourse, is analysed in an attempt to address two research questions. I investigate, first, the frequency and distribution of the selected digression formulating phrases in the two languages, and discern which of the two contexts of digression (i.e. beginnings and ends) is more highly marked, and, second, their use in connection to aspects such as syntactic configuration and position, and co-occurring features of semantic and pragmatic meaning. The contrastive perspective adds precision and richness to the treatment of digression.
Keywords: digression, topic shift, parliamentary discourse, Spanish, English.

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1. Introduction

Language is a dynamic process that can be described as a flowing stream, to use Chafe's metaphor (2001, p. 673), consisting of thoughts and sounds. Among the forces that give direction to the flow of thoughts are topics. Thus, participants in conversations focus on different topics, moving from one topic to another, and organise these topics into discourse topics or topic chains (cf. Garrido & Rodríguez Ramalle, 2015, p. 215).

It is well known that the notion of topic is essential to concepts such as coherence and relevance (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 68; Martínez Caro, 2014, p. 193). Yet, there has been and still is controversy and lack of clarity around this notion (cf. Brown & Yule, 1983, pp. 68ff; Calude, 2007, p. 122; Wardhaugh, 1985, p. 139), and, because of the "malleable, fluid topical structure" of conversational language (Calude, 2007, p. 123), the task of discourse analysts to segment the conversation at hand into recognisable discourse segments is indeed a complex one.

Within the discussion of topic, the problem of determining transition points of topics and describing their internal structure is recurrent in the literature (see Brown & Yule, 1983, pp. 94ff; Downing et al., 1998; Lenk, 1998; among others). The signalling of topic boundaries serves as a good indication of the way topics evolve and shift in the discourse flow and is less problematic than an analysis of topic based on its content (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 95; Goutsos, 1997, p. 35). The present paper deals with one specific context in these transitions of discourse topics, that of digression, in an attempt to explore the way speakers deviate from their main topics to come back to these after a while, and how they mark these transitions in spoken discourse. The study explores the asides occurring inside these topical segments, by which the discourse topic at hand is temporarily suspended before it is resumed again, and adopts a contrastive perspective, focusing on Spanish and English. What are called here topical segments have been referred to as speech paragraphs

or episodes in the literature (cf. e.g. Chafe, 1994; van Dijk, 1981; Martínez Caro, 2014; Redeker, 2006). The exploration of whether speakers signal the boundaries of these discourse segments in these two languages, and if so, how they indicate deviations from the main discourse topic is expected to contribute to the area of continuative and contrastive discourse relations (cf. e.g. Klumm, 2022) as well as to a theory of a global discourse coherence (cf. Lenk, 1998).

2. Digression: definition and research goals

Digression is a discourse function that is identifiable and distinct from other, similar coherence relations, and which varies cross-linguistically. It is important to give a definition of digression that is as precise as possible and can help discriminate this function from other related phenomena, for instance parentheticals, (other) interruptions and flashbacks. The present section is partly devoted to this.

I take the following features to be inherent in the concept of digression.

a. *Digressions are parenthetical discourse sequences.*

The line distinguishing digression and topic shift is not clear (cf. Pons & Estellés, 2009; Traugott, 2020), and indeed in the literature the two notions are often used interchangeably (cf. e.g. Fagard & Blumenthal, 2020). However, digressions are parenthetical; an important aspect of digression is that the prior discourse topic is always resumed after the digression: there is always a return to the main line of the story (cf. Lenk, 1998) after the temporary deviation from the main discourse topic. Thus, every digression is a topic shift but not every topic shift is a digression.

b. *Digressions operate at a macro discourse level.*

It is important to distinguish digressions from 'short conversational asides'. Digressions as discourse sequences are to be distinguished from micro-structure or local parentheticals appearing in the structure of a sentence; see for instance Dehé (2014) for English and Fuentes Rodríguez (2018) for Spanish. As an example of a parenthetical which would not count as a digression, see the italicised sequence in (1):

(1)   So when you're practising <unclear> bail application, *and I'll talk about that in a moment,* think about what you're going to do, how you're going to stand.
(Example taken from the British National Corpus: HUU, lecture)

c. *Digressions convey information generally presented as subordinate or secondary to the main discourse topic.*

Digressions represent information that *may be* relevant to the main discourse topic but which deviates from it in some way. The degree of such relevance or connectedness may vary, from those discourse sequences not related to the main topic to other connected to it but yet seen as divergent in some way (cf. Lenk, 1998, p. 248). Generally, however, the information conveyed by the digressive discourse sequence is presented by the speaker as background, secondary information, contributing to a lesser extent to the development of the main topic.

d. *Digressions must be initiated and finished by the same speaker.*

My view of digression involves a diversion of the main story line in which the same speaker both diverts and returns to the main topic when the digression has finished. A reflection of this is one of the phrases considered in this study, with *digress*, where this verb naturally occurs with the first-person singular pronoun (as in *I am digressing*).

The working assumption in this contribution is that, given that a digression is a divergence from the main story line, a clear though temporary break in discourse topic continuity, speakers will tend to inform their interlocutors about the (beginning and/or end of) the digression, by means of cue phrases and explicit formulations marking this. Thus, digression is expected to be explicitly marked, rather than be left implicit; its markers are seen as explicit indicators of contrastive discourse relations, functioning as important cognitive devices for topic discontinuity in discourse (cf. Klumm et al., 2023). Given the temporary halt in the discourse flow, and the expectation by language users that discourse units will be continuous with respect to the preceding discourse, the speaker feels compelled to, first, explicitly signal that a digression is taking place and, second, seek and use linguistic mechanisms that can minimise and downtone the impositive effect of this act (see 4.1).

The literature on discourse coherence in general and on topic shift and digression in particular has, thus far, frequently focused on discourse markers (cf. Schiffrin, 1987), as in Fraser (1996), Lenk (1998), and the special issue in Fagard and Charolles (2020), among others. In their study on 'indicators of topic shift' on parliamentary discourse in Spanish, Cortés and Hidalgo (2015) offer a collection of six types of markers which includes a category of 'metacommunicative elements' resembling my digression-formulating devices. Their study, however, does not discuss digression specifically and consequently none of the expressions covered in the present paper are selected for their analysis (pp. 295ff). Diachronic studies on digressive discourse markers include Estellés (2009), Redeker (2006), and Traugott (2020). The present study takes a less common approach by exploring a selection of recurrent phrases in Spanish and English which, in contrast to discourse markers (e.g. *now, by the way*, *incidentally*), have an explicit reference to the digression and signal that a new direction with respect to topic is proposed. I refer to these explicit metacommunication expressions as DIGRESSION FORMULATING PHRASES, which are seen as part of topic formulators (Downing et al., 1998, pp. 273-274).

The notion of FORMULATION derives from Heritage and Watson (1979), who define it as a "gloss on talk" (p. 149). Another significant distinction between discourse markers and the formulating phrases (FPs) on which the current analysis will be based is that, whereas the former often indicate *local* coherence relations, signalling relationships between immediately adjacent units of talk (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 31; Lenk, 1998, p. 247), the latter have a wider scope, indicating a relationship to other segments of discourse such as the topic before a digression (Lenk, 1998, p. 247). Section 3 presents the digression FPs selected for this study.

Considering the above observations and previous research on digression and topic shift, the research goals underlying the present contribution are the following:

a) study the frequency and distribution of the selected digression FPs in Spanish and English, and discern which of the two contexts (i.e. beginnings and ends) is more highly marked;
b) and explore their use in connection to aspects such as their syntactic configuration and position, and co-occurring features of semantic and pragmatic meaning.

3. Methodology: corpus coding and annotation

The data used for this study is extracted from the European Parliament Proceedings Parallel Corpus (EuroParl; cf. Koehn, 2005), a corpus of parliamentary debates where the Spanish and English components of the corpus were examined, for the analysis of the selected expressions and their translation equivalents in the respective counterpart language (EuroParl version 7, released on 15 May 2012; cf. http://www.statmt.org/europarl/). The extraction of the relevant dataset was carried out using the corpus management tool Sketch Engine (see https://www.sketchengine.eu/). The discourse type considered here (parliamentary discourse) involves extracts of spoken language where the speaker holds the floor for some time, a type of 'conversational narration' in the words of Degand and Simon (2009). At the same time, the spoken texts analysed here are different from other types of conversational narrations, in view of the planned character of the speeches, on the one hand, and the agenda-driven and time-sensitive nature of parliamentary discourse, on the other.

Some limitations of this version of Europarl must be taken into account here regarding the translation of texts. As already stressed in the literature (cf. Cartoni et al., 2013; Fagard & Blumenthal, 2020), it can be difficult to assign the status of the source language in the statements extracted from this corpus for two reasons. First, although the meta-information can give the original language of the statement, this tag is missing from a number of statements. Second, Europarl texts are not always directly translated from the source language, but sometimes through a pivot language, generally English. Therefore, it has been difficult to measure the impact of the source text on the translation equivalents of the digression FPs (cf. 4.3).

With respect to the phrases selected for analysis, a search was made to determine the choice of FPs relevant for digression with a higher frequency in the corpus. The resultant selection comprises the following phrases: in Spanish, phrases containing the nouns *paréntesis* (EN *break, pause), inciso* (*insert), digresión* (*digression*), and the expression *como acotación al margen* (*as an aside*); in English *as an aside*, and phrases including the verb *digress* and the noun *digression*. Disregarded were words and phrases with a low occurrence (e.g. SP *divagar, retomar*) and naturally those not occurring at all (e.g. EN *getting back on topic*). Other searches with a wider meaning yielded too great a number of examples to manage, for instance EN *let me* and SP *permítanme*, and were thus disregarded as well. The final selection of digression FPs includes a manageable number of tokens in each language.

All in all, a total number of 346 occurrences from the EuroParl corpus was examined (221 in Spanish and 125 in English) and, after the exclusion of several tokens non-relevant to the contexts of digression, the final dataset included 220 tokens, 117 in Spanish and 105 in English. Among the excluded examples are those where *paréntesis* is used with the meaning of 'gap in time', *inciso* to mean 'subparagraph' in a document, and where *digress* does not imply a digression produced by the speaker alone (*... indeed, we have had no shortage of digressions during this debate*).

Once the dataset was delimited and established for Spanish and English in the context of digression, I analysed it with respect to the following parameters (including frequencies): (a) FP where the selected term (e.g. *paréntesis, digression*) occurs; (b) syntactic pattern and position of the phrase in the corresponding clause; (c) discourse context (i.e. beginning, middle or end of digression); and (d) translation equivalents in Spanish and English, respectively.

Regarding the position and syntactic pattern of the digression FP (b), five categories were distinguished, partly following Fagard and Blumenthal (2020, p. 209), namely INITIAL, PARENTHETICAL, FINAL, IN PARENTHETICAL CLAUSE, INDEPENDENT NP and OTHER. I coded in both INITIAL and FINAL positions cases which occurred with a strong pause (fullstop, colon, semi-colon, etc.) or coordinating conjunction (SP *y, pero*; EN *and, but*, etc.) immediately before or after that phrase, respectively, as in (2) and (3). In the examples, the relevant word or phrase is marked in italics. Translations in English of Spanish examples (except those in section 4.3) are mine and do not necessarily coincide with those found in Europarl.

(2) Por último, Señorías, *permítanme una pequeña digresión*.
  'Finally, ladies and gentlemen, allow me a brief digression.'
(3) But I digress.

The PARENTHETICAL category includes parenthetical FPs (i.e. in commas, brackets, etc.) where the FP is detached (4a). When the detached phrase (e.g. *entre paréntesis, as an aside*) followed by a comma is found

in the clause initial position it was coded in the ɪɴɪᴛɪᴀʟ category, leaving the ᴘᴀʀᴇɴᴛʜᴇᴛɪᴄᴀʟ category for FPs in medial position. The type ɪɴ ᴘᴀʀᴇɴᴛʜᴇᴛɪᴄᴀʟ ᴄʟᴀᴜsᴇ, in turn, refers to cases where the FP occurs in the domain of a parenthetical clause (or phrase); see (4b). ɪɴᴅᴇᴘᴇɴᴅᴇɴᴛ NP occurs where the FP is a noun phrase preceded and followed by a strong pause (4c). Finally, the category ᴏᴛʜᴇʀ comprises all other cases, mainly FPs occurring in medial position but not parenthetically, as in (4d).

(4) a. Mr. President, *as an aside*, I should like to inform you that the Irish have just won the first race at the Cheltenham festival.
    b. The European Commission -- and please excuse me if *I digress* -- and Parliament have worked to make this possible.
    c. *Un inciso:* se ha dicho que Andalucía es un territorio muy rico agrícolamente.
      'A digression: it was said that Andalusia is a very rich agricultural area.'
    d. Señor Presidente, estimadas y estimados colegas, permítanme que realice una *digresión* sobre la vida cotidiana a la que se refiere nuestra ley.
      'Mr President, dear colleagues, allow me a brief digression into the daily life our regulation refers to.'

With regard to what can be called the discourse-management context, three contexts are distinguished for digression, the ʙᴇɢɪɴɴɪɴɢ and ᴇɴᴅ of the digression, as well as a ᴍɪᴅᴅʟᴇ context, where the speaker marks the digression once that has been already initiated. These three contexts are illustrated, respectively, in (5).

(5) a. Mr President, before I start my speech proper, I will *digress* briefly in order to respond to Mr Trentin.
    b. There you have the small *digression* that I wanted to make, Madam President.
    c. ... es posible debatir incluso con la izquierda europea sobre las cuestiones en que deberíamos seguir o no al gobierno. Se trata de un *inciso*. Estoy de acuerdo con la ponente en que es correcto enterrar los programas de orientación multianuales.
      '*... it is possible to discuss even with the European left on the issues in which we should or should not follow the government. I digress. I agree with the speaker that it is right to put to rest the multi-annual guidance programmes.*'

4. Discussion of results: signalling digression in Spanish and English

4.1. Digression formulating phrases: main patterns and semantic-pragmatic meanings

Table 1 presents the examined FPs in Spanish and English and their frequency. As can be seen, the Spanish dataset shows a predominant use of phrases with *paréntesis*, followed by those with *digresión* and *inciso*, with frequencies above 20%. In English, in turn, the phrase *as an aside* is most often used, but less clearly than Spanish *entre paréntesis*, and competing closely with phrases including the verb *digress*, and the noun *digression*.

Table 1. Digression FPs in Spanish and English and frequency

Digression FP	Spanish	Frequency	English	Frequency
	paréntesis (in FP)	52.14%	*as an aside*	40.78%
	digresión (in phrase)	21.37%	*digress* (in phrase)	35.92%
	inciso (in phrase)	20.51%	*digression* (in phrase)	23.30%
	como acotación al margen	5.98%		
Total no. of tokens		117 (100%)		105 (100%)

The following are the frequencies per million tokens obtained in the searches of these phrases in EuroParl through Sketch Engine (previous to filtering of tokens): *paréntesis*: 2, *digresión*: 0.62, *inciso*: 2.91, *acotación al margen*: 0.12, *as an aside:* 0.76, *digress* (all verbal forms): 0.71, *digression*: 0.74 (last accessed 15 January 2022).

This section discusses the type of phrases occurring with the key terms of digression, the first of the parameters for the analysis of the dataset (cf. section 3). Rather than a simple description of the most recurrent phrases found, this discussion will be closely associated with a series of semantic and pragmatic meanings that recur in the contexts of use of these phrases. This is completed with an account of the syntactic pattern and position of the phrases in the corresponding clause given in 4.2.

Tables 2 and 3 present an overview of the type of meanings which are common in the expression of digression in the selected dataset for each language, each of which will be explained below. To avoid a discussion exclusively based on the numbers, the features have been measured around three degrees or frequencies of occurrence, so that a quick look at the data will hopefully give a general overview of which of these features are more important in each of the strategies used in Spanish and English. These features should be understood as not being mutually exclusive but possibly (and indeed often) combining in the same

FP and its context. In addition, a final note is added in the tables to indicate whether the phrase in question commonly functions as an idiomatic phrase, as is the case of *entre paréntesis* and *como acotación al margen* in Spanish, and *as an aside* in English.

Table 2. Semantic-pragmatic meanings and patterns in digression FPs (Spanish)*

	paréntesis	digresión	inciso	como acotación al margen
ASKING FOR PERMISSION	√	√√	√√	√
BREVITY OF DIGRESSION	√√	√	√√	
STAGE OF DIGRESSION	√√	√	√	
APOLOGY FOR DIGRESSION		√		
WISH + CONDITIONAL-SUBJUNCTIVE	√	√	√√	
STATE OF FACT-REALISATION	√	√	√	
IDIOMATIC PHRASE	× (parenthetical *entre paréntesis*)			×

* The meaning of the symbols used here and in Table 3 is as follows:
√ >5-15%; √ √ >16-39%; √ √ √ >40% (Notice that frequencies lower than 5% have been excluded)
× yes (*blank*: no)

Table 3. Semantic-pragmatic meanings and patterns in digression FPs (English)

	as an aside	digress	digression
BREVITY OF DIGRESSION	√	√√	√√√
ASKING FOR PERMISSION	√	√√	√√
WISH + CONDITIONAL	√	√	√
MODAL VERBS		√√√	√
APOLOGY		√	
STAGE OF DIGRESSION			√√
REALISATION		√√	
JUSTIFICATION OF DIGRESSION			√
IDIOMATIC PHRASE	×	× (*I digress*)	

As already mentioned, the type of interruption that a digression entails, as a contrastive discourse relation, is perceived by the addressee as a break in cohesion, and certainly more so in the genre considered here. In contrast to the spontaneity of conversation in which topics flow more freely, in parliamentary debates there is an agenda of points which need to be discussed. The wish to go off-topic is a move which is presented as non-negotiated and breaking the social conventions of spoken discourse. To compensate for this, the speaker resorts to some strategies of meaning and speech acts seeking to downtone and minimise the imposition of the digression on the audience. Quite a few of the features presented in Tables 2 and 3 should be seen in this light: asking for permission to digress (see examples 6a and 7a), highlighting the brevity of the digression (6b, 7a), apologising (6c), using modal verbs and hypothetical tenses to express uncertainty and tentativeness (7b), in combination with expressing the wish of the speaker (7b), and finally, trying to justify the aside (6c) and sometimes presenting it as in the benefit of the hearer.

(6) a. *Como acotación al margen, si se me permite decirlo*, su mejor decisión está a su derecha.
   'As an aside, if I may say so, your best decision is sitting on your right.'
 b. De nuevo, en cuanto a la credibilidad y el juego limpio se refiere, *un breve inciso* sobre el Pacto de Estabilidad.
   'Again, as credibility and fair play are concerned, a brief aside about the Stability Agreement.'
 c. *Pido disculpas por esta digresión*, señor Presidente, pero *considero obligado* empezar mi intervención reiterando mi gratitud para con el Parlamento ...
   'I apologise for this digression, Mr president, but I thought it right to begin my speech by thanking Parliament once again ...'
(7) a. Indeed, *allow me a slight digression*.
 b. However, *I should like* to point out, *as an aside* in this Question Time, how much Sweden and all the other countries have contributed to this matter via their national budgets.

The phrases *entre paréntesis*, *como acotación al margen*, and *as an aside*, in comparison, exhibit fewer of these features, which can be interpreted in relation to their use as fixed, highly idiomatic phrases, not easily allowing additional linguistic elements to enter into the phrase or in their nearby context.

The features that I have called 'realisation-state of fact' and 'stage of digression' are not connected to the impositive effect of the digression and the resources used to minimise it, but rather are a reflection of the processes going on in the mind of the speaker in relation to discourse organisation. Thus, in (8), for instance, the phrase *But I digress* reflects the moment the speaker realises that s/he has gone off-topic, and wishes to warn the audience about this.

(8)   Had I left at quarter to ten this morning, I would have arrived in Brussels seven hours later, although today, as it happens, I might not have arrived at all for there is strike action going on too. *But I digress*. I wanted to point out to you that a five-hour train journey to get here and five hours back seems an inordinately long time in this day and age.

The category 'stage of digression', in turn, implies the use of phrases where the speaker explicitly refers to whether the digression is starting or, more often, closing a discourse segment. The phrases *abrir/cerrar un paréntesis* (*to open/close a parenthesis*) point to this meaning, as well as the use of *zanjar* (*settle, resolve*), as in (9), to conclude an issue or business, in this case the topic.

(9)   *Esto zanja mi digresión* sobre asuntos nacionales. Me gustaría dar las gracias a los muchos oradores…
'This closes my digression into domestic affairs. I would like to thank the many speakers …'

Finally, it is worth mentioning that a reduced number of examples contain a 'double marking' of the digression, indicated by the use of more than one FP (cf. 10a), or a digressive discourse marker, such as *anyway* or *incidentally*, in addition to the FP (10b-c).

(10)   a.   *Saliéndome del tema, haciendo una digresión* respecto del debate sobre el tema de Albania, y estableciendo un nexo con el anterior debate sobre Kosovo, quisiera…
'As an aside, digressing from the discussion of Albania, and connecting with the previous debate on Kosovo, I would like …'
   b.   *Incidentally, as an aside*, as some of you have referred to statements that I made when presenting the recommendations for the Greek Programme, I ask you…
   c.   I do just need to get off my chest, hwever, that it puzzles me where my highly respected fellow Member from the Dutch Socialist Party (SP) found the large landowners of whom she spoke in a country as densely populated as the Netherlands. *Anyway, I digress.*

4.2. Position, syntactic pattern and context of the formulating phrases

Table 4 presents the results obtained from the organisation of the examples for syntactic configuration and position.

Table 4. Syntactic configurations and positions in the Spanish and English datasets

	Spanish	English	Total (%)
FINAL	27 (23.08)	19 (18.45)	46 (20.91)
INITIAL	15 (12.82)	21 (20.39)	36 (16.36)
IN PARENTHETICAL CLAUSE	15 (12.82)	14 (13.59)	29 (13.18)
PARENTHETICAL	12 (10.26)	9 (8.74)	21 (9.55)
INDEPENDENT NP	4 (3.82)	2 (1.94)	6 (2.73)
OTHER	44 (37.61)	38 (36.89)	82 (37.27)
Total	117 (100%)	103 (100%)	220 (100%)

Focusing on the most relevant syntactic patterns and positions, namely the extreme positions (initial and final) and the parenthetical ones, a number of important insights can be extracted from this table. Firstly, the final position is the most frequent syntactic configuration for Spanish, but not for English, which shows similar percentages for both the initial and final positions for the digression signalling phrases. In Spanish the final position is mainly preferred for phrases with *digresión* and *inciso* (cf. 2 above for an example with *digresión*); in English common combinations are phrases with *digress* (cf. e.g. 8).

In spite of this first observation, it seems reasonable to combine all the phrases that occur in a parenthetical position in the dataset, both as a detached phrase or a phrase inserted within a clause or larger phrase, as they appear to have a similar function. The resulting numbers in both languages (around 23-22%) show that there is indeed an important tendency to indicate the digression strategies in a parenthetical position. However, the different phrases adopt a preferred position: thus, combinations with *digresión* are never used parenthetically as a detached element, although they may appear inside a parenthetical clause.

Another conclusion extracted from these results is that the initial (thematic) position is more exploited in English than in Spanish for the digression FPs. In Spanish the only phrase whose main position is initial is *como acotación al margen*, and because the number of tokens in this combination is low, its overall importance is

not high. In English, *as an aside* also shows a predominant initial position but, as we see in Table 1, it is the most used phrase in this language, thus contributing more importantly to the overall picture.

Finally, although the number of independent NPs is not very representative, their presence, even in a small sample like this, is evident that the strategy is important for signalling digression in both languages. These NPs indicate in all cases the beginning of the digression and have a clear cataphoric function, announcing the contents of the digression immediately following (as in 4c above).

Table 5 presents the overall results regarding the context of the digression that the FP signals, that is, whether the phrase is marking the beginning, end or a middle point in the digression.

Table 5. Context of digression in the Spanish and English datasets

	Spanish	**English**	**Total (%)**
BEGINNING	93 (79.49)	86 (83.50)	179 (81.36)
END	12 (10.26)	15 (14.56)	27 (12.27)
MIDDLE	12 (10.26)	2 (1.94)	14 (6.36)
Total	117 (100%)	103 (100%)	220 (100%)

There is an overwhelmingly high tendency for the speaker to mark the beginning of the digression by the phrases explored. Considering the type of disruption in the flow of discourse entailed in the digression (cf. 4.1), it seems reasonable to suppose that the speaker would wish to warn the addressee of this from the very beginning. Further, the end of the digression is signalled to a much lesser extent, often in the phrases with SP *paréntesis* and EN *digress*, and in just a few cases does the speaker mark the digression in its middle point.

Cases where the end of the digression is marked are not oriented towards the minimisation of the impositive effect of the aside, but rather show features of realisation, stage of the digression or what has been called 'state of fact' (see 4.1), as in: *There you have the small digression that I wanted to make, Madam President.* The digression-signalling strategy announces the end of the digression and the imminent resumption of the previously discussed topic.

4.3. Spanish-English translation equivalents

This section presents an overview of the translation equivalents of the selected phrases in the respective counterpart language. The results obtained are given in the following two tables, which provide the most common translations of digression phrases in contrast, from Spanish to English (Table 6) and from English to Spanish (Table 7).

Table 6. Most common translation equivalents of digression phrases in contrast (Spanish to English)

	paréntesis	**digresión**	**inciso**	**como acotación al margen**	**Total**	**%**
aside	6	2	6	7	25	23.81
digression	3	13	1	0	17	16.19
parenthesis	16	0	1	0	17	16.19
digress	3	8	2	0	13	12.38
incidentally	4	0	0	0	4	3.81
by the way	4	0	0	0	4	3.81

The frequencies in Table 6 (right-hand column) are with respect to the total number of digression phrases in Spanish. Notice that the number of tokens in the parallel concordance obtained in Sketch Engine differs slightly with respect to the simple concordance (here 105, instead of 117; cf. Table 1).

Table 7. Most common translation equivalents of digression phrases in contrast (English to Spanish)

	as an aside	**digress**	**digression**	**Total**	**%**
digresión	0	9	16	25	26.04
al margen	13	0	0	13	13.54
paréntesis	4	3	3	10	10.42
inciso	3	2	1	6	6.25
aparte	4	1	0	5	5.21
divagar	0	5	0	5	5.21

The frequencies shown in Table 7 are with respect to the total number of digression phrases in English, and calculated here for 96, instead of 105 (cf. Table 1).

Looking at these results and the specific contrasts from the searches in the corpus, the following conclusions can be reached:

a) Just a few strategies are commonly used in each of the two languages to express the meaning of digression in the other respective language. The FPs with the terms *aside, digression, parenthesis* and *digress* are frequent in the English translations, and *digresión, al margen*, and *paréntesis* in the Spanish translations. A selection of these examples is given in (11) and (12).

(11) a. *As an aside*, I would like to say that it is not easy to understand how these texts and the voting procedure are handled in this Parliament.
Como acotación al margen, me gustaría decir que no es fácil comprender cómo se están manejando en este Parlamento estos textos y el procedimiento de votación.
b. *A brief digression*: Commissioner, negotiations with the countries of the Andes and Central America have been completed.
Una breve digresión: Comisario, ya se han completado las negociaciones con los países de los Andes y América Central.
c. *Let me open a parenthesis* here just to say that the ITER project has been of paramount importance.
Permítanme abrir un paréntesis para mencionar que el proyecto ITER ha tenido una importancia enorme.

(12) a. *Si me permiten una breve digresión* por el mundo del estudio de las lenguas y la literatura antiguas, les explicaré...
If I may digress briefly into the world of the study of Ancient languages and literature, let me explain...
b. Sin embargo, *quisiera decir al margen* que lamento que en las cuestiones de personal no utilicemos más los contratos de plazo fijo.
I would, however, *say as an aside* that I regret that in staffing issues we do not make more use of fixed term contracts.

b) The exact equivalent is maintained in a few cases, especially with *parenthesis* (translating *paréntesis*), *digression* (*digresión*), and in the idiomatic phrase *as an aside* for *acotación al margen*, from Spanish to English. In the reverse translation, *digresión* (for *digression*) and *al margen* for *as an aside.*

c) The case of the English verb *digress* offers interesting contrasts in Spanish, since there is no clear verb in Spanish rendering the meaning of *digress* and a tendency to offer phrases containing a nominal, rather than a verb, capturing the digressive meaning is observed. Some common possible translations are *hacer una digresión* and *abrir un paréntesis.* In general, the digression FPs tend to be built around a noun, rather than a verb, also with other combinations. At the same time, as a translation of *digresión* into English, a common option is *digress* (cf. 12a), reflecting here a preference of English for the use of a verb rather than the nominal equivalent translation (*digression*).

d) The translation of the digression phrases into the other language with a discourse marker indicating digression and/or topic shift, for example *incidentally* or *by the way* in English, and *por cierto* in Spanish, is only found in a small number of cases, in the translation of *entre paréntesis* to English, as in (13):

(13) ... and *incidentally* that has nothing to do with xenophobia or anything like that.
... y, *dicho sea entre paréntesis*, no tiene nada que ver con la xenofobia o algo similar.

Therefore, the translation of the FPs of one language into the other language tends to be with another FP.

5. Conclusion

This contribution has looked at the relatively understudied phenomenon of digression, from the point of view of how this function is signalled by speakers using FPs as signposts for their hearers, which explicitly indicate the shift in topic continuity. The somewhat low number of tokens analysed has been compensated by a thorough and detailed analysis of the examples from different aspects of form and meaning, and from a contrastive perspective. To achieve a greater degree of significance of the results and to provide a fuller picture of digression and its Spanish-English contrasts, it would be necessary to widen the scope of the sample, and look at a greater variety of genre types. An interesting comparison would be one between the more planned spoken genres, such as the parliamentary texts explored here, and more spontaneous types of speech (e.g. conversation). All in all, however, the data presented in this contribution offers a good starting point in the exploration of this phenomenon, and the contrast provided between the two languages an appropriate basis for further cross-linguistic analyses.

The results from the corpus analysis indicate a predominant use of phrases containing *paréntesis* (e.g. *entre paréntesis*) and the phrase *as an aside.* Other commonly used phrases (all with frequencies above 20%) include the verb *digress* in English, followed by the nouns *digresión* and *inciso* in Spanish, and English *digression.* Regarding position, results stress the difference between FPs and discourse markers: whereas discourse markers indicating discourse management tend to occur initially (cf. Fagard & Blumenthal, 2020),

the FPs examined here adopt various sentence positions, not only initial (mainly in English) but also final, both in Spanish and in English. They also commonly appear as parenthetical elements, in medial position. As for the context of digression, the FP overwhelmingly marks the beginning of the digression, which is seen as a wish by the speaker to warn the addressee of the disruption in the flow of discourse from the very beginning.

Looking at the translation equivalents of the digression FPs, a limited number of strategies occur in the dataset expressing the meaning of digression in the other respective language, and occasionally the exact equivalent is maintained. Spanish lacking a clear verb rendering the meaning of *digress* in English, a tendency is observed for the FPs in this language to build around a noun, and conversely, a preference for English to use *digress* rather than combinations with nouns.

Finally, the FPs signalling digression often co-occur in the dataset with a series of semantic and pragmatic features. An important number of these have the purpose of minimising the wish of the speaker to go off-topic and downtoning the imposition of the digression on the audience, such as expressions of apology, asking for permission to digress and highlighting the brevity of the digression.

The limited scope of the present paper has not allowed the exploration of a discourse relation intimately connected with digression, that of topic resumption. That is, the point in the spoken discourse where, after the temporary suspension of the topic at hand, the speaker returns to that previous main topic. A preliminary search on the EuroParl for topic-resumption FPs suggests that common instances are, for Spanish, the phrase *volviendo a* and for English, *to return to* and *going back to.* Worth discussing in this respect is the difference in the marking of topic resumption by contrast to the beginning and end of the digression. Also worth exploring is whether topic resumption is in fact signalled as a different discourse function from the closure of digression, as suggested for instance by one of the translation equivalents found for SP *cerrando este paréntesis* as EN *to come back to my main point*.

With this contribution it has also become apparent that the translations into another language can be used to strengthen or weaken the claims made on the basis of a single language (Aijmer, 2002, p. 25). The contrastive perspective adds precision and richness to the treatment of digression, and the insights and methods deriving from this analysis can serve to shed light on other cross-linguistic studies about discourse phenomena typically occurring in oral speech as a reflection of the complexity of natural language.

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